MICHAEL CISCO

# THE DIVINITY STUDENT

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Cheeky Frawg Books
Tallahassee, Florida

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# Introduction
# by Ann VanderMeer

When I first encountered Michael Cisco's work, I was publishing a magazine titled *The Silver Web.* At that time I had no intention of venturing into the book publishing world and was content to continue with short fiction only. I often found novels in my mailbox from writers hoping for publication and I turned them all down, manuscripts returned unread.

However, Cisco's cover letter intrigued me. He said he had been referred to my press by Thomas Ligotti. So of course I had to find out just what it was in Cisco's work that Ligotti trusted I would enjoy. My intention at this time was merely to read the manuscript and then to return it with a polite rejection.

And then I read the first chapter. Holy crap! In the first chapter a man gets struck by lightning on a hill, and then these shadowy people come out of nowhere to stuff his dead, smoking body full of pages of archaic texts. This brings him back to life and onward to a secretive mission. Holy crap!

So I continued to read on until I realized this was a book I absolutely must publish. I was so completely drawn into the hallucinogenic story that I couldn't put it down.

As The Divinity Student continues on his journey and enters the city of San Veneficio, he is introduced to a wide variety of characters, and he learns the truth of his mission. He is more than a lowly word-finder, working in the dark shadows of Mr. Woodwind's office to find words that have fallen out of favor. It is his secret mission to unlock those secret words that have the power, and dare I say it, the magic to transform not only The Divinity Student, but the world.

It is a strange, dark and wonderful adventure that Michael Cisco takes us on—from an isolated Seminary into the bustling dangers of San Veneficio, an odd yet somewhat familiar city in a world of his own making. And just as The Divinity Student is sent on this holy mission to uncover the power of language, so too does Cisco present us with his command of these very

words. He draws the reader in with promises of the forbidden and then delivers not just the visions, but the real thing, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph.

While reading his work, you feel as if you are under the influence of some kind of mind-blowing drug, you're not quite sure if it is dangerous enough to hurt you or if you will make it through to the end unscathed. But by that point you don't really care—you just cannot stop reading.

Needless to say, I did publish *The Divinity Student*, and to great critical acclaim. The novel received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* and won an International Horror Guild award. It continues today to be discussed in literary circles and is held up as the perfect example of the modern gothic fantasy novel. Praise from fellow writers was expansive. Brian Stableford said, "It is a brilliantly bizarre and compulsively readable heroic fantasy for everyone who understands why the pen is mightier than the sword." Paul Di Filippo described the hero as "a neurasthenic Clint Eastwood drifter, a linguistic bounty hunter whose prey is not a man, but an enlightenment beyond logic," and Ligotti, who was instrumental in bringing the novel to my attention, called it, "a festival of unrealities, an entrancing body of hallucinations mutilated with surgical precision by a masterful literary maniac."

Since the publication of *The Divinity Student* in 1999, Cisco's work has been compared to Borges, Kafka and even William Burroughs (one of his literary heroes). He has published a number of amazing novels. But this is the book that started it all, the one that began his journey into the world of words. It is also the book that got us all hooked on the drug known as Michael Cisco.

# one: the cloud

First black clouds dimming the sky, trailing shredded

white veils in the rustle of settling audience, and, as each cloud passes framing itself perfectly in its own outlines, one especially stands out—looming like an iceberg above the others. It's moving steadily along now, coming fast and low over green canyons. It dips between the hills into a smell of water, and the placid anxious hush of rain falling on trees and grass.

The Divinity Student, in his heavy black coat, is scaling a steep mound down in the canyon. His feet are slipping on the wet grass; he steadies himself with outstretched arms. He's wet to the skin, his spectacles are fogged and running with rain. The slope is water-softened and slick, so he's forced to scrabble at roots and stones to avoid falling. He didn't want to miss a walk in the rain. Above his head, the sky changes color from gray to black. Breathing hard and almost spent, he gives himself a last violent shove and crests the hill. For a few moments he stands bent with his hands on his knees, then he turns to take in the entire canyon rising about him on all sides like a green bowl. The sky above him thunders and blackens to coal black: a cloud iceberg-high. Flushed, he pads across the green breast of the hill's crest to the highest peak. He passes a hand over his cropped hair and water rills over his fingers. He reaches the top—the sky splits above his head. Standing in tall grass, eyes lost in the distance and the wind playing in and out of his shirtsleeves and blowing up his coattails searing blue lightning scrapes its fingernails along his body in a column lifting him off the ground. The cloud opens a moment and reaches down, pulling him off his feet. Suspended in an infinite moment, flat in two dimensions between ground and sky, his body arching his eyes staring fingers close on snapping air white face splits apart as he turns down twisting to the dirt—stone dead. Quiet wet grass in his mouth and rain streaming over his sodden coat on his dead body, glassy eyes rigid and open, staring at one hand fixed in mid-convulsion, cupping the rain in its dead palm, his dead back shattered.

Overhead, the clouds pass by. Rain falls, time continues to pass.

Now they're finding him. Hands take him up; they make off down the slope, in the mud, with his body. The ground levels and the trees close in like clouds and spatter them with big drops of rain. They carry him away to a low building enmeshed in trees and the shadows of trees. Quickly they bring him inside, lay him across two sawhorses and start cutting at him—they gut him like a fish, cut open from throat to waist, red hands pull his ribs apart, head and shoulders hanging down, his arms lying flat on the ground, tugged back and forth as they empty him out. They dump his contents cooked and steaming on the floor, and bring up stacks of books and manila folders, tearing out pages and shuffling out sheets of paper, all covered with writing, stuffing them inside, tamping them down behind his ribs and crushing them together in his abdomen. What pages they select and what books they tear are of little importance, only that he be completely filled up with writing, to bring him back, to set him to the task. Then they suture him shut again—drag him to the tub (his arms and legs dangling and catching on things overturning tables and chairs) and dump him in the water, slopping blue water on gray stone pavings, and together they draw breath and drop open their mouths, screaming noiselessly as they shove his face under the running tap and pushing him full under the water with their red hands, under their wings. The Divinity Student twitches, lashing water over the lip of the tub. Gaping they push him down harder. He jerks to one side. They turn the spigot up full bore and shove his face into the stream—he thrashes, his body goes livid and white then his eyes and mouth snap open and gape wide all screaming without sound (they grab him and pull him out).

Clammy, bleached colorless, hauled out of the water, flopping on the ground, they hold his head as he coughs water and stares across the floor at the heap of his own guts, and recognizing them he screams again, screams himself into shadows and clammy darkness.

Later he's discovered back at the Seminary, lying pale and unconscious in an infirmary bed. Orderlies shake their heads over him "How did he get here?"

The Divinity Student comes to a few hours later. For a moment the memory comes racing forward like a black wave of frigid water, and he

recoils and slams his mind shut. Fingers pulling, his flesh melting around them like clay, coughing water on gray paving stones—he snaps to attention and faces the windows across from his bed, reduced to a bland white smear of cloud-filtered daylight without his glasses. He stares at his hands. They look like talons hovering over the colorless blanket, something mechanical about them now. He sits perfectly still; nobody approaches or notices him, he fades in and out of consciousness with a bitter taste in his mouth and an ugly feeling throbbing behind his temples.

Disjointed he awakens again and it's the next day already, morning or afternoon he can't distinguish. Someone is drifting tall and angular down the aisle, coming to a halt at the foot of his bed like a docking ship. After a while he recognizes him—an important administrator, a teacher greatly feared in the Seminary. His face is blurred in the bland light. The Divinity Student sluggishly brings his name into focus: it's Fasvergil. As if in response Fasvergil seems to click into place in his overlong cassock, bunched frayed and torn around his feet. He looks up in pale response. Fasvergil is staring at him.

"You've had quite an adventure. Two of the boys saw what happened to you."

The Divinity Student feels a sudden weight in his chest. He tries to speak but his brittle throat cracks with the effort and he can't.

"Who brought you back here?" Fasvergil leans in close, eyes fixed as if cutting him open, searching the Divinity Student's face. "Yes what is it?" he hisses. But the Divinity Student is already blurring, a gray haze misting over his eyes, his vision occludes until he can just manage to stare at his clawlike hands resting on the blankets. He sits mute and emptied. From nowhere Fasvergil says he will return and goes off to nowhere, leaving the Divinity Student alone in nowhere.

Discharged back to his room, he spends his days sitting at his desk watching the clouds pass through his grimy windows. Sometimes the wind moans in the chimney and he jerks in surprise, but most of all he watches the sky, and presses his hands against the panes convulsively when lightning flashes outside. Why is he still here? What's taking so long? Light goes dull in the stale air of his room, behind him his disheveled bed with sorry printed flowers waning on yellow linen. Incubating alone in his dormitory room, he

gathers the clouds and swathes himself silently in them, with a jagged, glassy feeling in his head. The past few days he has seen signs and portents that something important is going to happen, and today he is preparing himself. Only just now he's fallen prey to a delusion, confusing his destination with thoughts of returning to his ancestral home, his very early childhood. He simmers in his bed wrapped hot in thick blankets and hallucinates a homecoming for himself—through the trees to his ancestral home. On either side of him the hills like low domes sit pondering in green from winter rain, trees waving him on down the street in wind that brings the smell of sweet grass and sour brush. His house is low, sitting preserved in the gelatin of memory. Overhead clouds boil and blow away, sunlight crashes down in glassy sheets shattering in glowing white aftersights floating under his eyelids. The light sharpens, dashing down, his eyes water and his vision goes pink. The house flares as he walks up to it on broken pavement, moving past the flat gray porch and chimney cooking in the heat, the air rustling close up close pressing on him like the palm of a hand. Lightheaded, he passes the house and moves to the yard behind, grass grown waist high, scorched yellow-brown and dry in spots, lush and dewy moist in others. The sun flattens the landscape dead flat, like walking into the sepia of an old photograph.

The back of the house is blazing with candles, the flames churning the air. The backyard is like a chapel. The trees above ruffle their plumage and stretch their wings, speaking up into the blue-hot sky. He sits just behind the house, the candles jutting perpendicular to the wall glowing white-orange at his back; he sits in a wooden seat, splinters biting into his legs, the corroded metal frame rusting against his fingers. He sits there and watches the light ebb and surge across the grass. This is where he came from, and the whole world will always look a little like it for him. He left this house to live at the Seminary and to train for—whatever's coming now.

Time shifts backwards, a wind winnows bricks away like leaves whittling the walls that frame the yard, the ground sprouts a white picket fence in their place. The yard undulates around him; the paving stones sink into the ground. He can hear birds, and the patter of wax dripping behind him. Grass shoots up around him and up his pant legs poking out through holes in the knees; squirrels and birds scrabble across the roof knocking leaves and acorns down on his head.

As he sits dozing, he gradually becomes aware of another presence; he is certain someone else is there. Without hurrying he looks up from the ground, unsure that he could get up if he tried, thinking that a voice or music is there, a white film shimmering over the yard, discrete from the flow of light and the dappled shadows of the passing clouds. Like highlights on pleated fabric, or a pale figure moving in fragmented light—fragile and transparent, a membrane speaking voicelessly at him, an original premonition of the future that he remembers for the first time. It gets hotter, heat closing in and descending from all sides, and he pushes it out from him again, pushing his chair back furrowing the ground—he thinks he can hear better with the chair pushed back. He opens his arms, and for a moment his heart murmurs and jumps as he sees the paleness rushing towards him, the tall grass beaten aside in great wide swathes as it comes. It's coming, it's coming for him finally.

A drop of wax lands pat on his shoulder. He looks at it as another spats his sleeve. Slowly, he looks up at the candles, and wax begins to rain gently down on him. He smiles. He opens his mouth and a tiny drop stings his tongue. Lowering his head he feels an aromatic evaporation sifting up through his head, a flavor like a continent of flowered meadows, sour-smelling hillsides, fresh grass, wet dirt, rotting leaves, dust. Wax coats him and he begins to burn in the sun like a candle. It comes down, he can see the grass curving down to the earth, the trees sagging, paint baking off the house, coming loose in flakes, then bubbling and liquefying on the pavement. The concrete flows off like mud. Holding out his hand, he sees the wax dribbling from his fingers, pink droplets. Inside, his bones glow white and expand, turn elastic, his blood evaporates, runs down his legs into the grass with a pleasant sighing sound. Heat brighter, whiteness all around, he reclines back in the chair to lose himself—and wakes, disappointed, in his bed. It's all still before him, still to be done.

The Divinity Student stares out the window, oblivious, fading in and out. At this moment, he is conscious of the Seminary expanding ancient and vast on all sides—the yawning cold hallways like caverns of stone, the dank subvestries and classrooms with bubbling peeling plaster walls and a mildewed smell, frosty choirs of icy wood polished to a dull luster by the chafing of nervous hands. Huge, gaping wide on all sides for him, also

crushing inward collapsing upon him. He seems to be present in every room, feeling the students coming and going—as they learn, they come and go with greater earnestness of purpose, striding powerfully along the halls as if they were on rails.

This has always been his room; it is the center of his world, his only place. The world seems to turn pinioned on a cold-burning point in his empty chest. The other students have been avoiding him lately; he's become intimidating. It could be lightning-infection trickling in tiny courses through what's left of his body, like a minute trace of poison. He's ready to go.

Fasvergil summons him to his office. Another Prefect stands beside him, together behind a massive desk. The Prefect speaks first: "Your studies are finished—consider yourself *commenced*."

Fasvergil scans the contents of a folder with lazy eyes. "We have been preparing an Assignment in the hopes of receiving an agent of your caliber. You have been *selected* for us."

Fasvergil and the Prefect eye the Divinity Student uneasily. He makes them nervous. His eyes stare straight ahead, as if he were laying track right on top of them. Now they can get him out of the Seminary and for that they are grateful.

"You will leave for the city as soon as possible," Fasvergil says with concealed relief, "your letters of introduction are in this folder. Further information will be forthcoming when you arrive. At the moment, certain things are still up in the air—when they settle again, we will be able to tell you what to do."

"I'll do as I'm told," the Divinity Student says, surprised despite his premonitions.

"There's no question of that. Go and pack."

"Chapel in one hour," the Prefect says.

The next day comes, and the Divinity Student leaves the Seminary knowing he won't be back.

# two: the city

San Veneficio gleams in the desert like a cut emerald on a naked seabed. The sky is a still canopy, like the underside surface of a lake, and blue light shines on the marble walls striking patterns across the hot ground like dancing traceries of light reflected from rippling water. Sitting alone in a spacious cab, the Divinity Student watches the sweat trickle down the drip on the face of the land flaring white in the steady beam of the sun, and for a moment he sees the cab from a bird's-eye view—a tiny white speck speeding along a black stripe. They pass long autos with black windows roaring hoarsely toward the city, which expands to fill the horizon. He rests his head on the vibrating door jam and squints against the dust pouring in on the wind—spotting now for the first time the famous monitors, giant lizards over ten feet long, racing with alarming speed over the dirt. One comes up by the side of the road and paces the cab for a mile or so, its oversized eyes fixed straight ahead on its coffin-shaped skull. He's heard that at night these lizards watch the city—it's said that someone looking over the town walls can see them staring back, their eyes blazing with reflected city light, the entire desert punctuated with pairs of lights, so that when the night sky is clear and dark it seems to extend down into the desert and surround San Veneficio on all sides with stars. Baked white clay streaks by, extending flat to the mountains in the distance. The Divinity Student was schooled exclusively in cold places, always rain and chill waiting outside the walls; he would anxiously look forward to the halfhearted springs and moist, wilted summers. Now, here, it's parched sharp bright heat stabbing in under his heavy coat, pricking him awake and alert and buoying him up. Only the two letters in his pocket stay sharp and white, like two rectangles of silvered glass, rigid, crisp, and cool. His assignment: go to San Veneficio, obtain a position with a professional word-finder, and wait for further instructions, followed by an illegible signature. He had found the sheet under his door and brought it to his Prefect:

"Where did this come from?" he asked.

“Higher up classified—ep!” raising his hand to shut him up, “No no sorry nothing more can’t tell you strictest confidence!”

The other letter will introduce him to the word-finder. He shoots towards San Veneficio, confident that this is where he is meant to go, he is starting. He has a momentum that came out of the sky. The dark marble walls draw near, black veined with green as far as his eyes can see. Beyond, the city bristles with spires and precarious minarets, lonely groups of statues standing against the sky atop copper domes, glyphed obelisks of polished basalt, gilded fountains, gargoyles; it’s a city of monuments. Above, birds circle rising on hot currents watching below in lazy ascent, quiet.

“This is the Eye Gate,” says the driver, raising his index finger from the wheel. A circular breach in the wall a hundred feet across looms up and swallows them, flattened at the bottom where it meets the road, and around it the Divinity Student can briefly see a pointed ellipse carved deep into the wall; huge triangular pieces of green jade gleam, smoothly radiating out to form the iris around the pupil-gateway. Lictors, in their heavy coats and bloodred gloves, silver face masks shining, turn this way and that, bored, waving the traffic into the city.

They drive up the Street of Dogs, making for the central plaza. The streets weave and twist passing through people’s houses and doubling back on themselves. The buildings are old and venerable, white plaster and modest columns, flat onyx streets, searing hot sunlight, smells rushing in through the window—orchards, wisteria, grilled meat, and people smells, carried on hot desert air. Finally, they make their way up the Street of Wax and into the plaza, vast and wide open, a colossal fountain at the center, buildings for giants looming all around. He pays the driver and makes his way to the fountain.

The plaza seems to curve downward as if San Veneficio is the only city on a tiny planet, hanging over the sky’s open void. He weaves through currents of natives in white cotton, wealthy ladies walking pet monkeys, occasional dignitaries in loiters, and he follows in their clear wake, pardoning himself in Spanish. Now and then he checks to see that the letters are still in his pocket as he hurries to the fountain.

There, he stands a moment in the spray, watching luminous fish circling sluggishly, the level of the water surging and dropping every few seconds as if the pool is breathing. He looks back at the town, eyes smarting from the

dancing reflections on the water, and then thinks for the first time to check the letters for addresses. They are blank.

Not knowing where to go, the Divinity Student sits on the clammy bank of the fountain and waits. People pass in streams and groups, cars roll by. Unthinkingly, he reaches into another pocket and produces a small metal weight on a cord that Fasvergil had given him back at the Seminary. Sheltering himself from crowd and wind, he spits in his palm and swings the weight like a pendulum above his open hand. His face drains and closes—he watches the swinging weight. Dry lightning sparks near the mountains on the horizon as the pendulum's point first swings over his palm. Even in the middle of town he feels completely exposed to the mountains and the freely moving air. He stretches a little into the rising wind—for a moment his hand is a still point. The weight swings back and forth, each time rotating a little more to the left, until it finally stops, hanging at an angle in the air. He gets carefully to his feet and orients himself by the pendulum's direction; he starts walking. The weight floats before him taut on the end of its tether like a dog on a leash, pulling him to one corner of the plaza, down close streets, past shouting water-sellers with earthenware vats and brass ladles, air growing closer—the sky rumbles overhead, people race to hide their stalls under umbrellas or find refuge under the awnings of clay buildings. Candles burn in absentminded alcoves, spice and paraffin smells, his eyelids droop and he feels lightheaded, but the pendulum tugs at his hand, threatening to come loose, he pushes himself off the voices of the fruit vendors and shouts of old women, shuffling awkwardly among the milling people.

Finally, he staggers into a small laundry with sweating walls. Steam billows hissing in corners, more Spanish over shrieking presses. He's pulled through to the back door and out onto a catwalk above a narrow alleyway. Stairs lead up a scarred brick wall to a deepset door with frosted glass panes. He scales the stairs and goes in, pocketing the weight and string. A tiny waiting room with oak paneling and red wallpaper.

The contrast of the brightness outside and the dimness here makes him blink. A plain woman is sitting behind a miniature desk in one corner, making columns of numbers in regular handwriting on tiny sheets of ruled paper. She looks up at him blandly.

"Is there anything you want?"

“I’m here for my appointment,” he rifles through his coat and produces the letters. She looks at them distractedly with two quick gestures.

“You should see Mr Woodwind,” she says, and directs him up a flight of stairs concealed behind a potted rubber plant.

The stairs are narrow and shallow tilting down at an angle making them almost impossible to climb. He picks his way carefully up, following a series of random landings and new flights, lit always by red light through glass-filtered fixtures.

Woodwind’s door is enameled, set directly into the wall, ajar and moving gently back and forth with the draft. The Divinity Student pushes it open with his fingertips.

Inside—a vast room, narrow but deep, with high windows, light filtering through a white haze, a smell of books. Shelves loaded with notebooks line the walls, their covers bulging with yellowing paper. Three clerks are shuffling about the room in excessively long robes, carrying stacks of printed pages, an occasional page spiraling to the bare wooden floor. Having crossed the room three times bearing ever larger stacks of paper, one of the clerks pauses, peering nearsightedly at the Divinity Student.

“I have letters of introduction for Mr Woodwind.”

The clerk sniffs at him dubiously and trudges off, absently waving the Divinity Student after him.Woodwind is standing at a table in the far corner: a tall whitehaired man with rolled sleeves and an apron. He is excising a page from an open book with a long pair of tweezers—dropping it into a pan of clear gray liquid. Having soaked it thoroughly, he retrieves it and plies it over a blue fire; his heavy brows knit as he reads the page’s new contents to a clerk taking dictation. Finished, he brings the page down just over the fire, and it bursts into flames. Black tatters flutter up to the ceiling. After repeating this several times, Woodwind sets down his tweezers and looks at the Divinity Student in irritation.

The Divinity Student offers him the letters. Woodwind tweezes them out of his hands, opens the envelopes with a few deft strokes and studies the writing offhandedly. Then he drops both the letters into the flame and they vanish brightly, Woodwind snapping his fingers for his secretary.

“The register the register” he mutters.

Woodwind’s secretary appears with an overstuffed ledger and flips hastily to a page half covered in meticulous illegible handwriting.

Woodwind himself scans down the page with his tweezers, looking up only at the end:

“Yes we have an opening for a word-finder,” he says in punctilious monotone.

Offered, accepted. Woodwind snatches up another page from the book in front of him and dredges it in the pan. The secretary presses a small buzzer on the wall; a thin reedy tone trills across the room. Within a few moments the young woman from downstairs appears at the door, and, directed by a hurried gesture from the secretary, walks over to him.

The Divinity Student looks back at Woodwind and his clerks, another flash of burning paper.

“I’ve been hired.”

She inclines her head a little to her left.

“You’ll be the new word-finder then.”

He has nothing to say. He nods.

She is satisfied and extends her hand.

“Let me show you.”

He follows her into the hall and up the stairs to the fourth floor landing. The red walls narrow until he’s hunching his shoulders inwards to get past. Her perfume is wafting back in her wake, passing in currents over his face until he feels ready to topple over backwards. Finally they come to a small door in a cul-de-sac, set directly into the center of the wall. She turns to open it for him; he looks intently into her face, her bookish face, which returns his gaze calmly. The doorway is narrow, he has to brush up against her to get into the room, passing through a curtain of her perfume and the serene scrutiny of her sphinxlike gaze. He steps up onto a high scuffed floor, and she smiles as he turns back to her.

“Come on.” She walks across the small office with its low ceiling to the back wall, a little window there with asymmetrical panes, shining with dusty light that seems to collect within the membrane of her blouse, making it glow like a paper lantern. She indicates a desk to him.

Slowly, he follows. There are three other desks in the room, a man at each, transferring columns of words from notebooks into codices by hand. Their presence is irritating, reminding him of the Seminary: the insect-scratching of their fountain pens, sleeves rubbing along word-wooden corners rattling papers. He steps up beside her, standing in a warm pool of

light. With a modest gesture, she pulls his chair out for him, like a maître d'.

"You should find everything you need in the desk," she says in a low voice, as if she doesn't want the others to hear.

He thanks her.

"Anything else?" Eyebrows raised, a small shake of her head. He stares blankly back.

She nods pleasantly.

"Yes, that's all. Any word that you encounter in your daily rounds that's not in the dictionaries should be recorded in your ledger. New words only, please."

She stands upright again, looking down at him. She stares at him. Then she leans down close to his face and wishes him good luck. A moment later she vanishes out the door and down the stairs.

As soon as the door is shut, one of the others wheezes and snorts. His partner giggles. The Divinity Student opens his desk, finding a notebook with the first dozen pages or so ripped out, a new fountain pen and ink bottle, and a huge binder with a sheaf of paper unopened beside it. Underneath the notebook, there is a small leather-bound dictionary in impossibly tiny print with a magnifying glass tethered to it by a faded ribbon. He pockets this and the notebook and reaches for the filing drawer.

One of the other word-finders clears his throat.

The Divinity Student looks up. It's the one who snorted as the woman left. He's heavy with short black hair and a threadbare black sweater, a pale, doughy face with small black eyes like currants. He rises from his desk.

"Switch desks with me! Yours is bigger!"

The one who giggled is looking on conspiratorially, grinning.

"You deaf? I said I'll take your desk! I waited, didn't I?" He briefly turns to the giggler, who nods once, "I didn't take it right away—I don't think you want to give me any trouble!"

The Divinity Student fills his fountain pen calmly. He is already ignoring them.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!" The snorter says.

The Divinity Student pockets the pen and caps the ink bottle.

The snorter stares at him a moment, then sits back down at his desk again. "Idiot," he mutters.

# three: the car

Pausing in mid-stride, two black dogs stare at the Divinity Student as he emerges from the office. Recoiling, he claps his hands and steps backwards into the threshold; they scrabble headlong down the stairs with clicking feet —a bad omen. With a rustle of papers, he recollects himself and follows them down slowly. At the bottom of the stairs there's a secondary door opening out onto a narrow street, old plaster walls leaning in to meet overhead, windows and sagging trellises, washing on lines, a thin trickle of people weaving out towards the plaza. He steps over an old drunk word-finder, hands tattooed with old words in blue ink.

"I'm interested in rivers."

Eyes on the cobbles, the Divinity Student makes his way to the corner, smelling food and garbage. There's a small cafe, two walls open to the street, scuffed white and orange checkerboard tiles reach to the low curb, a field of sturdy white metal tables and chairs with the occasional long-faced readers and chess players. He notes that some of these are playing against mechanized opponents.

"Chess is a game of competing algorithms," he thinks. "One piece is gradually predetermined by the action of play to end the game, either in checkmate or stalemate. All pawns are agents, like me."

The Divinity Student navigates fast to the counter, at chin-level above glass display cases smeared with white transparent finger and palm marks. A willowy wall-eyed student takes his order and his money without looking at him, assures him it will be brought to his table, and disappears.

He turns and finds a seat close to the street, grown quiet and still. Across the plaza he can see crowds of miniature silhouettes frothing around the buildings as cloud shadows glide flexibly across gleaming stone courtyards. The city settles quiescent in the early afternoon. He turns his attention to the pocket lexicon, flipping through at random: *afflatus, epiclesus, soteriology* —these he knows—*ylem* catches in his throat; a kid in a coarse white apron clatters the tray down in front of him and shuffles off, drawing his nose

along his sleeve. Alone again, the Divinity Student pours smoky-looking tea through a sieve over three sugar cubes. Two leathery, triangular pouches lie black and brown in grease on his plate. He cuts into one with his knife and steaming oil dribbles out, a spicy smell, tiny white curls that look like pearly onions inside, and some soft blue powder. He eats quickly, burning his tongue. For some reason he still needs to eat.

Were it not for the coppery hair thatching his head, Mr Ollimer would be unrecognizable—of all the people he has ever met, not one of them can place him in their memories save by the color of his hair. In feature, figure, dress, and behavior, nothing immediately remarkable, as empty of distinction as a technical drawing. He is the third word-finder upstairs at Woodwind's, apart from the giggler and the snorter. The Divinity Student looks up to see him standing expectantly by a nearby table, eyebrows up. Their eyes meet.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Ollimer asks seriously.

The Divinity Student raises his right hand in a small wave indicating the chair opposite him; Ollimer rushes to sit, nodding, looking down.

Ollimer toys with a napkin; he's groping for words.

"Those bastards," he finally says in a birdlike voice. "I was transferred only last week and of course I had to end up with them. They pulled the same tomfoolery with me about my desk."

The Divinity Student responds with another gesture, eyebrows up, a small frown, slight inclination of his hands.

"They started talking about you the moment you left the office, but I wouldn't worry." Ollimer flicked a look at him. "They won't dare give you any trouble as long as they think you've got Miss Woodwind's favor."

"Miss Woodwind?"

"Yes—the secretary—don't you remember?"

"I meant to say I didn't know she was related to—"

"—Oh yes, I'm sorry, I misunderstood—yes, she's his daughter." Ollimer rocks forward and backward as he speaks.

The Divinity Student's gaze drifts off, follows two Koreans passing, carrying a drum.

"I just met her. How could I have won her favor?" he says after a moment.

Ollimer pouts and thinks a moment. “Her demeanor around you, I suppose. She’s fairly peremptory with us . . . ” Ollimer leans in closer and taps the table with his finger. “You really ought to take advantage of that, if she genuinely does favor you. There are advantages . . . ”

“You’ve never been her favorite.”

Ollimer grins as if the Divinity Student had made a joke. “Oh no, certainly not me.”

The Divinity Student tips his head back and gazes up past the rooftops to the sky’s racing white and blue.

“Where did you receive your training?” Ollimer leans his elbows on the table and holds his hands in front of his face.

“I’m a Divinity Student.”

Ollimer looks around cautiously. A car with tinted, impenetrable windows pulls up in the alley almost immediately, its idling engine sets the table thrumming. Ollimer hisses something inaudible under the noise.

“What?”

“Listen!” Cutting his right hand sideways in the air, close to the table, he speaks in a tight whisper, “You’re serious? You were trained at the Seminary?”

“Yes.”

“Listen! I must speak with you later! I know some people—”

The car revs its engine, backing into the alley and then jerking forward again, over and over, garbage squelching under the tires, people dodging out of the way. Ollimer casts a panicky look over his shoulder, and repents immediately.

“Oh now I’ve done it! I look suspicious!” he moans. “I’ve got to be going!”

He holds his hand out. The Divinity Student looks at it as if he doesn’t understand. Panic flashes in Ollimer’s eyes, he waves his hand desperately at him, and just barely exposes a business card concealed in his palm. The Divinity Student takes Ollimer’s moist hand and palms the card, slipping it into the pocket lexicon with one fluid, inconspicuous motion. Ollimer waves timidly and walks quickly back towards the office, weaving and wiping his face. Suddenly, the car breaks its jerking back and forth and swings wildly forward, blaring its horn and flaring its headlights, onto the curb, sending tables flying; the Divinity Student runs out into the plaza

knocking his table in the path of the shrieking car lurching over mangled chairs towards him. He makes straight for the nearest alley and gets clear, vanishing into a million streets.

# four: the dream

In deepening shades of blue the day burns off into space and the stars flare one by one. The Divinity Student watches the sky's well clear from a hammock he has rigged between a fire escape and a drainpipe five stories above an empty alleyway. Incidental headlights pass at the end of the alley, filtered through the slats of a makeshift fence, sending thin vertical bands of light floating left to right over the brick walls or pouring through a single window close to where he is hanging, illuminating the featureless upper corner of a white plaster box of a room. The Divinity Student can't afford a place of his own.

Lulled by these tides of light he drifts off, face upwards. Initially, he couldn't bear to look at the sky, afraid he'd fall up into the black air, falling so high he'd burst, but now he's up there already, the stars all around him, close enough to touch, humming and sparking at him like millions of brilliant little machines.

Lying there, he slowly becomes aware of a slippery feeling; he's covered with oil, clear oil oozing out of his skin, and it's soaking into his clothes—he can't afford to ruin his clothes, they're all he's got! He undresses as quickly as he can swinging in his hammock, piling up his garments at his feet, drops a sock but with surprising agility he snaps it up and tosses it back into the hammock. Naked now he stops himself, staring at his arm, and now his legs and feet, and all the rest of him—he's turned powder-white. It's pigment, like flour under his skin, white as wax and coated with clear mineral oil, dripping off his fingers, getting into his eyes and making them smart, even the hair on his head is slick with it; the rest of his body is hairless. Confused and shivering with cold, he manages to squat in the hammock, hugging his knees. The wind plays over his body and he gets another surprise—something on his back. What's happening to him?

The wind is playing over his back, delineating his form in the air, and there's something changed back there. He reaches his arm around and runs the palm down his wet skin, and feels deep fissures and ridges. He peers

over his shoulder and sees his ghostly reflection in a window. Three huge dorsal vents slant down on each side of his spine, yawning open and upwards like gill slits, white skin stretched tight over powerful curves: funnels of skin and muscle held out by fans of cartilage. He crouches down and presses his hands to his head breathing heavily and shuddering as he feels the vents twitching horribly. As he breathes he feels the vents breathing moistly, drawing air in and forcing it out through narrower openings along his sides. He screws his eyes shut and presses his hand to his mouth, filled with transparent teeth with fluorescent blue and red veins and flickering silver nerves.

He crouches frozen in place, afraid to lie down thinking he might crush the vents on his back. Panicking he starts gasping for breath, his chest is being squeezed shut, and across his back the vents jerk open, cold night air sucks in and rushes out the small openings on his sides. Faster and faster the air sluices through as he gasps for breath, stronger and stronger until the pressure pushes him up off the hammock, his legs straightening, and he rises straight up into the sky on columns of night air. The city expands below him, he passes through its lights and further into the ocean of colorless light limning the bottom of the clouds. He aims straight up, his arms at his sides, straining with effort and petrified that any moment he'll plummet to earth. A tiny white line in the sky, he keeps his body straight and slants up at the clouds. The cloud ceiling doesn't budge, muddy and silver, refusing to come closer. He charges at it with all his might; he attacks the clouds and strikes straight to the heart, with air running over him pushing oil into rivulets along his back and sides; he blinks it out of his eyes. With all his might he pushes himself up, scarcely thinking about what he's doing, everything fades, and he loses himself in the effort, and then moments later he remembers that he's flying and it overwhelms him, nearly sending him toppling headlong out of the sky.

Finally after an eternity of struggling, vapor closes around him like curtains of water, boding rest—he's been holding his breath, now he lets it out in humid air and breaks through. The cloud comes up beneath to support him and he falls to his knees, disgorges clear, sweet gelatin from the exertion of flying.

Spectral light on a cloud landscape, a thunderhead in the distance is the highest peak in a chain of mountains from the south, wispy cloud trees

stand frozen along streams of mist. Atop a nearby hill, Mr Woodwind lies sleeping wrapped in white blankets, a white garland on his brow. Miss Woodwind emerges from beneath a tree. As she draws near the breeze brings him the smell of her perfume.

“He’s sleeping,” she says softly and raises her eyebrows at him. The moon emerges and her face blurs as she comes closer, hair framing a glowing indistinct face. Her hair pats her brow in a light breeze that bathes him in her milky breath.

The snorter, whose name is Householder, and the giggler, whose name is Blandings, squat in one corner of the office, shoes in hand, bashing clumsily at a rat. They’ve been hunting rats all day, joking with each other and drinking. Ollimer had shivered when the Divinity Student arrived; he still pores over his notes without looking up, the top of his red head jerking back and forth, from his notebook to his lexicon and back again. Householder hits on a new game, filling his mouth with ink and spraying it on the walls for fun. The giggler’s running for his bottle when Miss Woodwind wafts into the office. She cocks a finger at Householder and smiles. He pats the giggler on the back and sets his ink bottle on his desk, following her out; as he reaches the door he turns once to grin back into the office, his teeth stained with ink. The giggler returns to his seat, smiling and shaking his head. The day passes.

The Divinity Student finishes his work and leaves the office twenty minutes later. He hasn’t gotten down the block before Ollimer catches up with him, peering over his shoulder.

“We were interrupted yesterday. I need to talk with you.”

The Divinity Student keeps going, doesn’t look at him.

“I’ve been reproaching myself ever since we parted. I ought to have warned you about the cars the minute you told me you were a Divinity Student.”

“Why didn’t you? Did you think it better to let me learn by example?”

“No! I assumed that you’d know about them, or that you might have been briefed about them before you came here.”

“Why did you assume that?”

“I’m sorry. I’ve said I ought to have warned you.” He touched the Divinity Student’s sleeve with a plaintive look.

“Won’t you listen to me now?”

The Divinity Student keeps walking with his head down, and nods after a moment. He blinks, as if noticing Ollimer for the first time.

Ollimer puts his hands in his pockets.

“ . . . I’ve never met a Seminarian before. It must be exciting! Do you have any *special* knowledge?”

A crash shatters along the alley walls, Ollimer starts and whirls, but it’s only a delivery boy—tripped and broke a vase. Ollimer is about to dismiss it, then he turns slowly to face the Divinity Student.

“You didn’t have anything to do with that, did you?” he asks, pointing at the boy gathering glass behind him.

“Coincidence,” is all the Divinity Student says shrugging, turning, walking towards the plaza. They go together, neither speak.

The plaza is empty, voices are faintly audible in a distant sussuration from its borders, the babble of the fountain laughing across polished black pavement, their footfalls and the wind tugging at their coats, the only sounds.

Ollimer steps out in front of him. “Listen, come with me to my aunt’s house—I want you to see something.”

“We’re due back.”

“Woodwind won’t care—please.”

They cross the plaza and thread their way through the vendors on Glass Street, duck into a side passage too narrow for them both to walk abreast.

“There’ll be no cars here,” Ollimer tosses over his shoulder.

Moving fast now, at a slow jog, the Divinity Student wonders if Ollimer isn’t planning something. The walls are smooth, with no doors or windows above, the sky is a dim, narrow beam. Ollimer moves rapidly, kicking newspapers. The passage gradually slopes downwards, finally into a sooty black aperture . . . a stale, bitter smell trails out of it in gritty, gray threads, leaving a sterile taste in his mouth. Ollimer vanishes in shadow below, and he follows with caution.

The tunnel is short, light from the far end only a few yards away, a squat vertical shaft with an iron ladder stapled to a brick wall.

“After you,” Ollimer graciously indicates the rungs. He’s more buoyant here in his element.

The Divinity Student doesn’t trust him. “I insist,” he says, holding out his hand.

Ollimer nimbly scales the ladder and the Divinity Student follows behind him.

They emerge in a vacant lot bordered by a rough plank fence, anonymous buildings visible beyond, a scorched brick house at their backs, fronted by a rickety flight of steps, a spidery web of light playing over the scarred bricks. Ollimer watches the Divinity Student’s face a moment, then nods and makes for the stairs. They ascend past stagnant-water windows, mostly empty rooms save for one on the third floor, where a dark-haired woman is ironing. The uppermost landing opens on a bright yellow door. Ollimer takes out his heavy key ring and unlocks it.

The Divinity Student steps into a small well-lit room with gold wallpaper and huge potted plants. Plush red furniture and shining mahogany wood, Persian rugs and aging photographs on the walls—it’s like a dollhouse.

Ollimer’s aunt Marigold is staring at the hearth, her smooth face and fine white hair flicker orange and gold in the firelight over a clean print dress and cameo brooch.

She turns a listless eye on him.

“This is a friend of mine, from the office—he’s a Divinity Student!”

She is waving distractedly at the sideboard. “John . . . ” Her voice is toneless and far away, “ . . . my needle, John . . . ”

Ollimer turns to the sideboard and brings her the needle and a small perfume bottle half-filled with clear liquid. She takes them with a lugubrious air and begins drawing the fluid into the syringe.

Ollimer cordially indicates a seat.

The Divinity Student takes the offered chair, while Ollimer busies himself with a tea tray. Eventually, they come to be sitting opposite each other, the tray between them, Ollimer leaning into the rising steam.

“Now I’ll tell you about the Catalog!” he says with relish. “You being from the Seminary, you’ll understand how important this is!”

“I’m listening.”

“All right. I’m not certain who else knows about the Catalog, but I can assure you, there’s none who knows more about it than me. I obviously can’t discuss how I came to know about it, but rest assured it’s absolutely genuine.

“What I’m talking about is a Catalog of unknown words—they’re secret words, ghost-words, and completely new. I’m not at liberty to tell you who compiled it, or for what purpose, but I’ve been authorized to offer you some access to it.”

The Divinity Student leans forward, his coat billowing around him in the chair. He stares at Ollimer.

Ollimer’s aunt sighs over the thrumming of the fire.

“So where is it? Who has it?” he asks.

“ . . . You must understand, what’s essential is to maintain the spirit of the thing, maintaining the spirit of the Catalog through practice . . . ”

“That doesn’t answer my question. You don’t have it.”

“Me? Oh, no, naturally not.”

“Who does?”

Ollimer hesitates. With slow and deliberate motion, the Divinity Student produces his old black leather Seminary Edition of the Holy Book and holds it up between them. Ollimer’s eyes flick between his face and the book.

“Don’t forget who I am.”

Ollimer looks at the book, his face pinched.

“No more games—tell me.” He lowers the book and Ollimer wavers back into his chair.

“The Catalog was destroyed . . . a few years ago . . . ” he says hoarsely, suddenly unable to lie.

“Then what am I doing here?! Who cares?!”

“Please, don’t be angry with me, I’m not strong enough for that!”

Tears shine in the corner of Ollimer’s eyes. He wrings his hands plaintively.

“I’m sorry—they tell me so little, I really know next to nothing about it!”

“Are they from the Seminary?”

“I don’t know—one of them seems to be a priest.”

The Divinity Student is silent. In the dim light of the parlor his face glows faintly.

“They must have given you a fragment to show me,” he says finally.

Ollimer nods, blinking. “Yes, I don’t know anything about it, actually. I’ve had it for years—you’re not the first, just the most qualified—”

“How am I qualified?” The Divinity Student’s face flares white, his voice is dry and spare.

“I don’t know. It’s all something very learned, I don’t understand it, I don’t have the education. Do you know what they mean? Is it that you know Greek, something like that?”

“ . . . What did they tell you to do?”

“To show you the fragment, that’s all. They say things are still falling into place; they’re waiting before they tell you anything more. Everything’s a secret with them, no one knows more than they need to—they’re afraid of the *cars.* The cars are on to you already, they suspect you, you’ll have to be careful. I’m sorry if I’m talking a lot! I don’t want to waste your time!”

Ollimer stands up.

“I feel such a strong desire to confide in you!” He says in an embarrassed, half-laughing gasp. “I suppose I’m a bit in awe of you. We’d better go into my room,” Ollimer glances at his nodding aunt.

The Divinity Student follows him down a tiny hallway to a boxy bedroom. Ollimer kneels on the floor and produces, from under his bed, a small tin chest with a padlock; he opens it and moves over to his desk. The light from the lamp shines up on his face, making it strange.

“Here.”

He opens a leather wallet and gingerly draws out a scrap of paper. The Divinity Student accepts it from him and sits down to read it. It is half of a sheet of notebook paper, with one corner torn off, taking with it most of the first word. All that is left are the last three letters,—*nia,* and the definition:

In the middle of the night, a beautiful young woman was wakened from a deep sleep, in an empty house, by a sharp pounding on her bedroom door. Upon opening the door, she saw only the empty hallway, no one anywhere along its length, or anywhere in the house. She went back to her room and shut the door behind her, but she had not taken her hand from the doorknob when the pounding sounded again even louder, nearly knocking her over. She immediately flung the door open, and again saw no one—except for a black and white spider hanging from a thread directly in front of the door.

The Divinity Student looks at Ollimer.

Ollimer had watched him reading.

“You see? I-it’s a word that can only be defined by a story. The word doesn’t represent that sequence of events—but rather it names what that

sequence *suggests*."

"Is that what you were told to say?"

Ollimer doesn't answer.

"The page is torn, what was the word?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, that's all there is."

The Divinity Student gives the fragment back and stands up, pacing over to the other side of the room while Ollimer replaces everything as it had been.

"Have you told me everything?"

"Yes—they just want you to think about it. Are you interested?"

The Divinity Student is thinking.

# five: the priest

The next day, a gray little clerk shuffles into the office and beckons to the Divinity Student. The others give him peculiar looks as he leaves the room, wending his way out back to the library, where Mr Woodwind crouches over an ancient book with a miniature knife, scraping ink samples from illuminated characters. He gathers the flakes of dried ink on the edge of the blade and deposits them in glass dishes filled with different solitions, watching them react and change color. The rest he heats on a small metal pan until they glow in the flame and combust.

Eventually, Woodwind notices him. “You, you’re from the Seminary? I need you to take these to the high priest of San Veneficio. His office is in the Orpheum.” Woodwind withdraws a black satchel from under the table and thrusts it at him. The Divinity Student has no more than touched the handle before Woodwind turns his back and goes back to his scrapings.

Outside, the air is warm and close and still, rich with orchard smells, and, looking down, he can see the heat boil all around him, rising in curling threads, shimmering around his shadow on the pavement. Above, the sky is empty: a fathomless, midnight blue color, some dark birds circling. The streets are unusually empty, and no cars watch him go, making his way down to Calavera Street in the center of town. He can see the Orpheum approaching over the rooftops, coruscating in the hot air. It’s a palace and a theater, with screens and stages; inside, cool night air coils in deep purple velvets and muted blue satins of curtains and chairs, mingling with the clean smell of water tossed from a few small stone fountains, and sometimes spiced with a faint warm breath off of someone drifting in from the frying street to press his face against cool stone and sit on cool plush seats. Like a gem set in the middle of town, the first public building in San Veneficio, the Orpheum rests today as it always has at the midpoint of Calavera Street, surrounded by peppery-smelling trees, some with reddish-black leaves, others adorned only with blue flowers, petrified now like coral in the light. The Divinity Student looks at the Orpheum with difficulty, so

much of it is lost in white smears of reflected light from the polished marble and the huge dome, carved from a single vast piece of green jade. Blinking in the searing light, he can see the statues hiding in alcoves, heavy basalt pillars supporting the facade: Orpheus soberly in the center—on his right, a smaller image where he enchants the animals and all of nature with his playing, and on his left, his head sings, drifting on river foam.

The sun's burden lifts from the Divinity Student as he passes into the shade of the pillars and the muted light within. He enters the main hall directly, huge and round with many doors set into its circumference both along the floor and above on the central gallery. High overhead, the dome glows green, translucent sheets of white marble set like windowpanes fill the room with warm diffused lambence. Water runs in thin sheets over the pillars supporting the upper concourse, collecting in a ring-shaped pool. On one wall, Circe is beguiling a crowd, already a handful at the edges are turning into pigs. On the other is Medusa, turning men to stone. A statue of Orpheus stands in the center of the room. The Divinity Student gets directions to the high priest's office from a young docent in a black uniform.

So, he pads up a wide, curving stairway, bypassing the public rooms to make straight for the gray, rounded service passages beyond. Soft red floors, light dapples the walls like water reflections, a museum smell of fresh paint, and over all a deep hush, save for an occasional courier rushing by on whispering feet. He follows the passage to its end, and there finds the high priest's door set in a funnel-shaped wall. The nameplate reads: Magellan. The door is wine-colored wood with brass hinges. He raises his hand to knock, but the door is already opening; a hairless little man peers up at him with large eyes.

"Yes?" Voiceless.

"I've come from Woodwind's . . . " his quiet reply.

"You're the Seminarian?" The words seem to bypass the air and sound in the Divinity Student's ears directly. He nods.

The other nods and gestures for him to enter. The ceiling slopes down to meet with the top of the door jam; the room is shaped like a funnel—the far wall is an ellipse three stories high into which is set a circular window with a pane fragmented into hundreds of palm-sized pieces of varying thicknesses and shapes, a gigantic eye. Immediately before this window is

Magellan’s huge desk and before that are seats for visitors, one of which is currently occupied by a nondescript client. A few others wait in chairs along the wall to the right.

Magellan’s familiar waves the Divinity Student to an empty chair and scuttles off to the wings—where racks of jars stand in static dust: later the familiar will tell his wife, “Today I saw a bottle containing a witch.” A witches’ ladder, a rope with cockfeathers woven in between the strands, throws curses. An impaled slug on a thorn, in a jar, withered, colorless, still, in formaldehyde. Shelves of stuffed animals, motheaten, ragged, semicollapsed, dirty, glazed milky eyes. Flat glass slabs for the invertebrates—fish, eels, worms, phosphorescent. On every surface, tiny, neatly penned labels in precambrian ink, dark jumbles.

The Divinity Student then sees Magellan. He sits almost invisible in a haze of window-refracted light, fragrant smoke curls about his head, wafting up from two braziers burning on his desk. He’s of no certain age, in his shirtsleeves and suspenders, and his face is painted white, white with black marks around his eyes, and his upper lip is also black. His eyelids have been painted with two green irises and black pupils, making it impossible to tell whether his eyes are open or closed.

The client’s voice breaks the silence. He’s looking down into his lap, a little embarrassed.

“Uh show me what it’s like to be uh—” he looks up at the high priest, “—a cat.”

The familiar runs up from the wings with a large jar. Inside, the Divinity Student can see a marmalade-colored cat preserved in formaldehyde. With a slight bow, the familiar sets the jar on the desk and retreats again.

Magellan, moving for the first time, slowly twists the lid off the jar and sets it down on the desk. A thin, sour smell rises from the open jar and trickles in the Divinity Student’s nostrils, pushing him a little back in his chair as if a little had seeped just into his skull. Magellan gets ponderously to his feet and dips his fingers into the jar. He slaps the air twice with the back of his hand, spattering the supplicant’s face with formaldehyde. Magellan scoops a little in the palm of his hand, brings his painted face down, and blows it in the man’s face like an atomizer.

The client remains perfectly still, breathing deeply as the spray settles on his face. After a moment he begins to sway in the chair, his breathing alters,

and for a time he sits there entranced. Magellan lowers himself back into his chair. The jar is resealed and spirited away, the cat inside jostling, fur pressed flat against the glass, face shrunken and vacated. The incense floats up to the ceiling, the window burns with light, the client's head falling back in slow motion . . . Magellan's fixed gaze. Watching, again the Divinity Student is overcome with the feeling that he is watching something vital to his unknown cause. He feels himself being drawn toward Magellan.

Eventually, the man's trance lifts. He rises unsteadily, struggling to speak, but Magellan isn't looking at him. So he turns, almost bending forward as if to bound off on all fours, but no, he catches himself—he weaves his way to the door and is gone.

The familiar appears again, and beckons the Divinity Student up to the desk, again without speaking, until he is within only a few feet of the high priest.

After a few moments, the familiar looks at the Divinity Student with impatience, gesturing at the satchel. The Divinity Student rustles around in the bag—empty, except for a velvet pouch, incongruously rich in the raggedy bag. He hands it queryingly to the familiar, who raises a cautionary finger to his lips and rolls his eyes at Magellan, who sits still and blank as a statue. The familiar opens the pouch, and pours out a dozen thin ivory wafers, each with a single word written on it. They are instantly sorted by the man's long, gray fingers, lining them up on the desk: verbs first, then nouns, then qualifiers, every one set in place with a single, precise tap. Then out comes a long wooden box from under his skirts and flips open to reveal an index of ivory wafers to which the new twelve are added in exact order, in exactly the right places. And throughout, he has not lifted his gaze from the Divinity Student.

"No one speaks freely to the high priest," he says, "not even myself." His voice is level and even, eyes animal bright.

"Those who petition may only use words from this index," pausing a moment to point at the box, "so as not to profane his ears."

He snaps the box shut.

"I know all the words, I have practiced, now I use no others. It is second nature to me."

The Divinity Student looks beyond him to Magellan, unable to tell if his eyes are open or closed.

“Have you a petition? Answer yes or no.”

He thinks of his flying dream, and of Ollimer’s word, and in the grip of an inscrutable impulse he says, “Yes.”

The familiar brings the box back out, but the Divinity Student shakes his head and beckons with his finger. He can feel the smaller man’s hand resting dry and light, like a bird, on his back as he leans close to whisper his message.

With a nod and a swirl of his robe, the familiar retreats into the wings. Now the Divinity Student is alone with Magellan, smoke between them and around them, light crashing down through the fragmented window, the Divinity Student feels an inky feeling inside, a draining in his head, the closeness of the air, looking at the high priest sitting there like a monument. So, he sits too, and gazes fascinated at Magellan’s silent face. He bites back a desire to ask him about Ollimer’s word.

Instead, one hand on the desk, he leans in, and speaking quietly says, “Show me what it’s like to fly.”

Again, Magellan stands. A jar is brought to him, this time with a buzzard pickled in it. The same thin odor steams out as the lid is twisted off, only this smell is different, dry and pungent where the cat smelled almost sweet. He swallows with difficulty watching Magellan’s great hands dipping into the formaldehyde—abruptly he thinks it’s time to go, he doesn’t want to anymore, but those hands come out dripping, thinking it’s time get up and get out, too late, cool drops spattering his face, that smell burning his nose, rushing up behind his eyes, and Magellan’s dreaming, painted face coming at him now, eyes open, the palm comes up, fine vapor shimmers his face, vertigo like a fast elevator, the weight of his body lifts and he’s cut adrift, curling around Magellan’s head like incense smoke, breath leaving, heart leaving, the light sucks him away, right away without a trace, or would, but Magellan holds him. Now he sees the window’s fragments of glass and fragments of light focus through the back of Magellan’s head, beaming out of his face, tinted green where it shines through his eyes, pink and white where it shines through his face—the desert white under the sun, blurring by underneath, the pull of the wind, hot air rising, motion on the plain’s floor between the hills, water on the horizon. Turning and rising for a long time, getting high past the hilltops, and hungry, watching the ground, sun just rising. There’s a twinge in his back. Seeing farther and farther, nothing

but him and the air, the horizon around his shoulders and dwindling behind his feet. As time goes on he gets to feel the air currents, upswells and churnings on all sides and below. In a moment he sees himself as high as the sun, harmless clouds on all sides, stiffness spreading across his shoulders and outstretched wings. Lightheaded he has an impulse to fly straight up, but at that moment he spies a bleached and torn carcass on the ground, and hungrily he drops in a twisting dive his stomach lurching.

Weight, and breath, and pulse come back. Magellan sits alone and still at the desk in front of him. The familiar has closed the jar and is shuffling back into the wings with it, light dwindling with the day’s passing, the Divinity Student sits without moving, looking numbly across at Magellan, until he is told to leave.

# six: the oro

He has lost himself in the streets, wandering out.

toward the city limits. Eventually he comes to himself, doesn't know where he is, the pavement ends and before him a small grove of old oak trees stands in dappled shadows. There's nobody around, so he ventures out onto the grass, feels its coolness through his shoes, lets the branches brush the top of his head. To him the trees smell dusty, like a familiar old room, they dust the air with their branches

and fill the grove with a white haze. He remembers the vertigo of flying, Magellan's dreaming face, sour formaldehyde smell. The Divinity Student looks back, but he can't see the pavement anywhere—there's not a rooftop or spire to be seen. He starts retracing his steps, trying to follow his footprints in the long grass. Everywhere he turns, more trees and corkscrew branches screening his view. It's quiet, no street sounds, no sign of the city at all, and with a growing sense of disorientation he breaks into a run, but his path crisscrosses itself in the grass.

He has a sensation of icy water rilling down his back and rinsing his insides, water for flesh, flesh filled with water. Panic boils wildly behind his teeth; he shakes himself, why is he overreacting? The sudden onslaught of fear confuses him still more.

Then a tree rattles behind him; he turns to look. There's a black something up in the boughs, watching him. He sees many dark limbs, leaf-green eyes, a porcelain mouth with fixed lips parted in an open grin.

He recognizes it: an oro, a tree spirit, misdirecting him into the heart of the glade and forcing panic on him. Instantly, the cold inside evaporates, a raindrop, a single one, drops into his right eye, and his hand moves to the book in his coat pocket.

"Please don't," a voice like rustling leaves and sighing boughs, "I want to talk to you, let's not fight over a social call."

"I'll listen."

Limbs spiral around the stationary spider-head. “I’ve got a message for you.”

The Divinity Student waits, right hand resting on the book in his pocket. “—Well?”

The white mouth moves closer, the emerald eyes remain where they were, lambent in the shade. “Divinity Student, you have been to see Magellan? He showed you something interesting?”

“Yes, that’s true,” he replies guardedly.

“Would you like to know how it’s done?”

The Divinity Student sighs and sits on the ground, but he does not take his hand from the book. Yes, he would like to know, but he says nothing.

“ . . . Magellan himself will teach you . . . provided you approach him properly.” The oro’s voice is insinuating.

“Did he send you?”

“ . . . No . . . But listen—I can tell you how to convince him.”

“Who did send you then?”

The oro retreats a little into the leaves. “That’s not important. I couldn’t tell you if I wanted to anyway—but I *can* tell you how to get Magellan’s attention.”

“All right, what am I supposed to do?”

A long, skinny, black arm unfolds from the tree, carefully to set a small wooden box just beyond the circle of shadow at the base of the trunk. Then the oro gathers its arm back to itself.

“Play this in the courtyard of the Orpheum, at the very top of Calavera Street, and let him see you playing it—then he will know to call you. You must not speak to him, the box alone should be your voice. He’ll send for you in his own way, and then he’ll teach you how to do that trick. Rest assured!” The eyes go out, the mouth is gone.

The Divinity Student jumps up. With caution, he approaches the tree, but the oro is dead gone. Turning, he can see rooftops angling into the sky beyond the trees again, and the pavement appearing again at the edge of the grove, sunset warming the dark wooden box at his feet.

Dogs’ sudden barking and he’s startled out of his reverie—they’re across the street behind a chain-link fence, snapping at some passing man, a red-haired man. The Divinity Student peers after him a moment, and then ducks

into a doorway, chasing still with his eyes—it's Ollimer, walking toward the edge of town.

Dry wind sends dead leaves scattering, the Divinity Student walks through them making no sound, following Ollimer. The other man is nervous, looking over his shoulder and sometimes turning all the way around every few blocks; he's hard to follow. Overhead the sky is turning a metallic twilight color; orange lights open in doorways and windows; the pedestrians thin out; cooking smells on dry desert wind billow on his face; Ollimer turns and freezes—the Divinity Student ducks behind a gargoyle. Was he seen? Crouching in the dark, behind a hunched back and folded leather wings, he leans forward to peer over its haunch.

Ollimer is staring up the street at nothing. Then just as abruptly as it came, his trance seems to pass and he gets going again.

The Divinity Student lets him go on a bit more, and then starts after. Turning a corner the road ends, he stops—oak trees spreading in the spectral light beyond the pavement, grass white and black, the same dust shining in the air now like tiny silver flakes. Just visible in obscurity are the same domes and spires he saw over the trees at sunset, it's precisely the same place.

Cautiously, he steps into the glade, taking care to avoid the trees. With his black coat drawn close about him he blends in with the dark. Around him the trees whisper as he passes, growing quiet after him. Unsure, he makes his way to the oro's oak. Ollimer is there. The Divinity Student flattens himself on the ground, watching him, completely silent. Ollimer is still apprehensive but he does not notice the Divinity Student.

Hesitant, he starts feeling around inside a hole in the trunk of the oro's tree until his arm is swallowed up to the shoulder. His eyes look upward, the tip of his tongue visible in his straining face as he feels around with his hand. Then he pulls out a scrap of paper and steps into the light, peering at it. After reading it over several times, he pulls out his wallet, stuffs it in, and hurries back up the road.

The Divinity Student takes a different route back into town, knowing that Ollimer will approach him tomorrow with another fragment of the catalog.

The Divinity Student finds refuge at an all-night cafe. Chairs and tables spill out in a circle of orange light to fill a corner of Candle Square, lost in

San Veneficio’s tangle of streets and closed to traffic. A single streetlamp burns at the far corner, the walls all around are dark silhouettes before a more luminous cobalt-colored sky. The interior of the diner is a brightly lit rectangle cut into the dark, like an aquarium in an unlit room, two sleepy waiters wearing white aprons drift to and fro, tidy up, tend a few late customers, or play dominoes on the counter.

Having given up his hammock, the Divinity Student falls into a chair at the farthest boundary of the lights, and dozes. He has a puzzling, desultory dream about lifeless mountain roads cut into shafts of solid rock and lined with boulders. Once he thinks he can see a tiny window carved in one of the larger stones, and possibly the suggestion of a door as well, with a faint strip of light along the bottom of the jam.

A noise wakes him up—somebody has set a glass down firmly on the table in front of him. Looking up, he sees a big dark-skinned man in a shabby suit of violet satin walking away across the circle of light. He sways over to an elaborate organ under an awning, sits down at the keys, turns a few knobs, and sets it going. In the light from the console, the Divinity Student can make him out—bald and heavy, baby-faced with black filigree tattooed around his eyes. A sign on the organ lights up, “The Clown Filemon” it says. Little blue and yellow lights wink over the organ pipes and keys, luminous strands of clear syrup draw a web in the air over his head, clinging to rigid silver wires, and translucent tubes, gathered around the console, glow with bubbling, phosphorescent green liquid. With slow and deliberate motions, Filemon begins playing—a mysterious, confidential humming in the pipes—but his eyes remain fixed, watching the Divinity Student. After a few minutes, he makes a quick gesture, as if lifting a glass to his lips, and jerks his head at him.

The Divinity Student looks up, and then picks up the glass in front of him —all right so far?

Filemon nods, and raises his eyebrows.

The Divinity Student empties the glass.

Filemon smiles and goes back to his playing, soft and low, for nighttime.

The Divinity Student settles back and listens to the music washing down onto him. A few moments, and then he pulls out the box. He looks up at Filemon, but the clown is watching the keys. He opens the box, and instantly the mechanism emits a clicking, hollow-timbred melody that

merges instantly with Filemon’s music. As the Divinity Student shifts his hands over the box, he notices that the tone bends with even the slightest change of a single finger’s position. He tries the bottom, but there the box is thickest and there’s no change. The edges and corners, which are singed, darker than the rest of the box, not only change the pitch when touched, but also cause a second, parallel tone, breathy and faint, to fill out the first.

As he fiddles with the box, he senses that either the random changes he makes in the melody are starting to complement Filemon’s music, or Filemon is anticipating him. He starts pressing the box more deliberately, the organ follows, the notes begin to weave around each other, the Divinity Student begins to decipher the pattern of the notes, and they play together.

When he next looks up from the box, it’s dawn. The music winds down, until finally they end on a single chord. They sit still a moment, listening to the sound ripple along the surface of the surrounding buildings, trickle and fade down the streets. When it is gone, Filemon shuts the organ off, smiling down at the keyboard in satisfaction. The Divinity Student puts the box back in his coat and sits back in the chair again, then looks over at the Clown. Filemon gets up without looking at him and vanishes into the cafe.

The Divinity Student takes a pad from his coat and writes at random, fragmentary notes about something: “Kill this idea by scrawling it. Happiest man, ribbon, water, droplets/griddle light, chord of music, through body in threads of water—close eye/defocus/reopen/mind-body aphasia momentary discrepancy—flash S.V.” He looks up a moment across the street at a spout draining. He stops writing, it stops draining. He starts writing and it starts draining again.

Two tables over, a card game degenerates, two men fling cards angrily at each other.

The Divinity Student rests for a while, and then heads back toward Woodwind’s.

# seven: the lesson

The day is long and slow. The Divinity Student leans over his desk, filling columns of words. Householder is absent, Blandings dozes over his ledger, and Ollimer works with typical diligence in the corner, conspicuously not looking at the Divinity Student.

“He’s waiting until after work to approach me,” he thinks, yawning dust. Cars race by beneath the one tiny window, rattling the pane—sometimes idling just close enough to set his teeth on edge. Every now and then he remembers the box in his pocket, gets nervous, “What if some car stops me and finds it? Bad enough I’m carrying the Holy Book—bad evidence.”

It’s hot in the office; he’s sweating, but he won’t take his coat off. He sits in a column of his own hot air, smell of wool and linen, and a fainter odor of old papers . . . an involuntary spasm jerks his arm, smears a word—remember a blast of light by a Seminary wall, jolted alive again in water? Blandings is looking at him, grinning, and the Divinity Student flips him off, hooking his thumb under his chin and snapping it at him; Blandings just laughs and turns back to his dozing.

No good trying to concentrate, his mind chasing after a dozen different things, just killing time. Is Ollimer actually his contact—why wait around? The Clown was sent to teach him how to use the box, make him ready to play it for Magellan.

So he goes for a drink of water, slouching heavily down the stairs, enervated, flat warm water from the cooler flavored with wax from the cup, just transferring weight from the cup to his mouth and down his throat.

Miss Woodwind walks by with her ledger. It’s thick and tidy, unlike those of the other word-finders with their pages sticking out or dribbling on the floor. She’s the best of the lot, has found more words than the rest of them combined, every page in her ledger neatly typed, with no mistakes. As she passes she favors him with a pretty grin and a graceful inclination of her head, fragrance trailing after, think then of father Woodwind sleeping on the clouds, her hair raining on his face in his dream.

He drags himself back up to the office again and stares at his record book for the remaining hours of the day.

He leaves Woodwind's quickly—he doesn't want to get trapped talking to Ollimer again. Once safely lost in San Veneficio's warren of streets, he lets himself drift—today would not be right to go to Magellan, he thinks, "the time is not yet."

This day was dull, flat, and now so is he. Tomorrow will be Saturday, he won't have to go in to work, he can get right with himself before visiting the Orpheum again. The streets spiral him out to the city's limits, this time to mount the encircling wall under the lictors' watchful eyes, glittering behind hexagonal black panes set in their chrome half-masks.

The Divinity Student watches night descend upon the desert's face. The great monitors are just visible, lumbering dark shapes streaking around, positioning themselves for their night-watch.

As the lights of San Veneficio come up behind him, he sees their eyes for himself, growing in brilliance like the stars overhead as they reflect the city's luminance back in tiny points. Like statues, they stare at San Veneficio, and at the Divinity Student, and the Divinity Student gazes back, amazed, at them.

Moved by a nameless impulse, he wanders over to a dim lamp hanging from one of the battlements, and draws the book out of his pocket. He reads to them from the first chapters, about the first world. The gray twilight place, trees, and rain. The trees' shadows fill with rain and the rain mixes with dirt until the shadows of the trees take substance in clay. And these shadows, having dimension and substance, begin walking around. They go to the beach, and eventually an intermediary comes from over the water and makes people out of them, and then leads them through the water up to this world.

He stops there. The monitors' eyes shine impassively back at him, and he puts the book away with a sheepish expression on his face. Those old eyes make him feel stupid, standing there with his book.

The Divinity Student's journal from his school days: "I met a cat dressed like me on a night road—all black but for a white collar, like me in my coat. We stared at each other across the road, orange yellow gold eyes it ran off

when a car came, I went into the dark feeling em,powered, like an exchange had been made." More recently he added, "Now I see them all the time."

He goes, eats dinner alone, and sleeps in a grotto in the park.

The morning sun strikes colors off the grotto walls and fills the chamber with pale halo-light. The Divinity Student has stripped himself and is bathing in a chuckling brook that spreads its sheet of water across a bed of smooth stone. He emerges glistening white in the new daylight and goes over to the sandy part of the cave, still full in view of the sun. With care, he draws the signatures of three spirits in the sand and kneels between them. He lights a small heap of incense beneath his coat, which hangs from a spur of rock within arms' reach, to cure it in the smoke. He burns likewise a paper prayer next to each of the three signatures. He anoints his hands and forehead with a little oil. Then, he sits still.

Kneeling, he puts his hands together before him and begins a chant from the Seminary—these are words that will trail in the gaps between divine words. The glinting morning air chills his wet skin and chill blooms in ghostly waves over his body and up under the hair on his head. Now, he starts rocking, gently, forwards and backwards, just slightly, just waving a little back and forth, like a blade of grass in a weak breeze, still chanting. The air is quiet. His voice is quiet, touching here and there on the rock walls behind him and humming sometimes at the cavern's rim, just audible over the hush of the stream. The chant rings hollow, the syllables proceeding chromatic in a slow kaleidoscoping pattern of cadence rising and falling. His hands rub together only a little bit, adding a dry, regular whisper of rustling skin pacing the tones. The chant is spiraling up with the smoke from the prayers and the incense to the roof of the grotto, to linger a moment and then drift out into the open air. The sounds all mount together, something nameless growing within them, to mingle with the light that strikes stone and water like a chime. Hands pressed together, fingertips brush brow, mouth, and heart in regular, circular motion, each gesture the same as a syllable, another sound falling, and all regular, nodding back and forth in rhythm, steadily back and forth in rhythm.

The chant ends, but the light, the water, the rhythm stays with him as he gets up, stays with him as he gets dressed and covers the traces, stays with him as he comes clean out of the grotto.

At the top of Calavera street, a small portal in the wall of the Orpheum opens onto a miniature courtyard. Above, Magellan's window is visible just beneath the dome, and within the walls, a few young trees in circular planters, the largest, an oak, in the center, and all connected by a stream that flows from a low opening in the inner wall. The paving stones are black, but three concentric gold rings radiate out from the oak planter in the center, describing a compass. There's no one there at all.

The Divinity Student steps out carefully, coming up close to the wall. He sees movement in the water and freezes—the channels are deep, the stones are smooth and clean, and there is a column of small children gliding slowly by, faces down, propelling themselves with only the barest movements of their golden arms and legs, so that the surface above them remains calm. Startled, the Divinity Student steps back, and then forward to look again. Still they flow by in a steady stream, alone or in pairs, and without needing to come up for air. He watches them, and then he sees it—a single child breaks off and vanishes into the submerged roots of one of the young trees.

These are larval oros, enjoying the relative freedom they are afforded before pupating in the trunk of a tree. Eventually they will emerge as mature adults, varying in form depending on the tree. Oak oros, for example, have porcelain mouths.

With care, he pulls the box out of his pocket, then looks up at the oak tree—and there, rustling, maybe the wind only but perhaps some moving black limbs, a brief glint of white.

"If you're going to spy," he says, not loud, but clear and sharp, "then help me. That'll give you something to spy on."

Without waiting for a response from the oak, he sits down and opens the box, trying to remember how he played with Filemon the night before. The oak's boughs sway in the hazy light, its smell comes to him on the wind, settling in his face and lulling him into a reverie. Behind him, in the water, he can sense a change in the orbit of the oro larva. Each one parts its lips and sends a bubble to the surface, a tiny puff of breath popping into the air, filling the courtyard with a fresh cool green odor that lingers in his nostrils and wreaths his head. Cool and calm now, the Divinity Student begins pressing the box first on its sides, then around the rim, moving languid fingers over holes in the top, the edges and corners, playing as he had with

Filemon, sending a resonant wood-tone through the stones and glass and up to Magellan's office. The music grows wide and full without becoming loud, mingling as had the chant with the light and the water sounds. The trees rustle their fingers.

When he's done and turns—there's a black boat waiting for him, motionless in the narrow channel. Rock steady, it neither tips nor sways as he gets on board and sits—it's small, carved from the trunk of an ebony tree, and polished. Once he sits, it begins to move, drifting toward the black recess in the wall. As he draws near, the Divinity Student can feel spray misting in his face—in he goes. The Orpheum weighs heavily down atop the arch a foot above his head, a turn, and all light dims and vanishes.

The progress in the dark is quick and steady, cobwebs of stale air brush against his face. It's lightless and silent as empty sleep.

Presently, a dim phosphorescence limns a dirt shore before the prow of the boat. Drawing in close, a narrow beach, with cypress and willow trees beyond, stiff blades of grass, lit with eldritch yellow light. The boat glides hissing up onto blue sand, and the Divinity Student disembarks. He glides across the beach leaving no footprints, and moves cautiously through the copse to an open patch beyond. He looks up—no ceiling, around—but no walls, the light has no source. He sinks to his knees, pulls out a matchbox with a small mirror set in the bottom. He holds it in the palm of his left hand, and swings his pendulum in an arc over it. His right hand is the still point. He listens to the crickets, the cries of mourning doves from dead trees looming like spiders; in the gloom, the pendulum is a pale smudge drifting over his palm. It takes a long time, but eventually it stops, pointing straight ahead, toward a break in the trees.

Where he passes the leaves change color. Stepping over a low hummock, the grass beneath his feet shifts from yellow to blue, and up ahead—a ruddy glow, grainy at the edges, halos a boulder. The Divinity Student draws in close, and feels the rock warm against his palm as he feels his way to the light. He finds a small clearing bordered with frosty blue and purple-black flowers hiding in the lee of a rock face, crowned with flaccid tendrils of moss, and dead trees. Tombstones and crosses shine bleakly in clumps of grass all around, ringed round by a ruined wrought-iron fence. A few ghost lamps hang from posts, the grassy face of the clearing is littered with parcels, bundles. Dimly he can see small gray forms skipping over the

ground like pebbles on water, carrying things to and from an open pavilion sprawling in the center of the clearing. Coming closer, the Divinity Student sees Magellan lying on a couch under heavy veils, his face still painted white and black, but now he's wearing regal garments, a yellow half-coat and long green vest, ruffles at his wrists and throat, knee-pants and white stockinged calves marble-smooth tapering into black slippers. Incense coils around his dreaming head from braziers fanned by his imps, who pour him cups of poison that he drains in contempt of death.

The Divinity Student enters the burying ground unchallenged, lets Magellan's blood-purple canopy draw him in, up to the couch. The high priest's eyelids are painted dark, now two diamond-shaped openings in his face, the Divinity Student feels their non-gaze settle on him. He sits down in front of the couch, an imp slipping a cushion underneath him as he kneels, and opens the music box again, slowly, letting the air calm his fingers, not talking nor trying to talk, but just playing as the oro in the oak grove had directed.

The air guides his fingers. A ululating phrase whistles out like a jet of steam, or a moth's fluttering wing, and repeats itself over and over again. Magellan snaps bolt upright; wan, hollow shapes come swirling in the pallid light around the circumference of the clearing, fast drumming follows, thundering up under the phrase, levitating it.

Magellan rises from his couch, bringing his arms out wide, he permits his familiars to bear back his sleeves, and he cuts his white arms with a cobalt knife.

Again, the Divinity Student repeats the phrase.

Ghosts boil in the air, rustling and crying, libations fall to them on the ground, witch lights glimmer for them, alighting on branches turning trees into candelabras.

Again, he repeats the phrase.

The drumming fattens and shakes the earth, timbre deepening, growing empty and vibrant at the core, each tone dwindles to a buzzing at the corner of hearing just before the next is struck, and faster.

Again he repeats the phrase.

Vague whitenesses gather about him; they open their dark smudgy mouths and exhale together, filling his head with a voiceless whispering of

breath like wind in trees, whistling and yawning all around him, rising up over the thunder of the drums to lighten his head.

Again he repeats the phrase.

Sensation now of his face being pressed against something like a metal barrier, already it bends as he is pushed into it. Magellan steps forward, lifting him, lightest possible touch of Magellan's hands under his arms, as if he is only a column of air, bursting through headfirst and the metal shatters and tears, rising into a rare darkness he has seen before, frozen a moment over the earth in a column of light, the unique nothing in the shadows of Magellan's eyes, flame rilling over his body, blood and perspiration and the rustle of dry papers sewn inside like a rag doll. He's a column of air. He's a vapor. He is evaporating out of a jar of formaldehyde.

The sun settles mundane light on a courtyard filled with trees. Quiet, not busy yet, empty canals of free standing water, the Divinity Student sprawled sodden on the pavement. A custodian wakes him, leaves him dazed on the ground and goes for a lictor or a guard. When he comes back, the Divinity Student is gone—wet footprints, sour smell of chemicals.

# eight: the commission

In an empty garage that. yawns onto the street the. Divinity

Student wakes, lying on his side, coming to himself only after staring at the supernatural brightness outside, blades of grass poking through the pavement, looking hot enough to burn. Turning to rise, the light stays in his eyes and colors the shadows.

This morning he won't go to Woodwind's, instead he forces himself sternly through the light, to assemble ingredients for today's experiment. After two hours he finds a chemistry shop on Jack-o'-Lantern Street; it's an impersonal place, simple metal racks with bottles, a counter, a plain old man behind the counter blowing test tubes from glass glowing pumpkin-colored. He pretends to browse awhile, always embarrassed when he has to buy something, eventually he gets up to the counter, has to wait five minutes for the attendant to finish blowing a flask. Finally, he manages to exchange a grubby bill for six long silver cans of formaldehyde in a brown grocery bag. A brief stop along the way back to buy some bread from a street vendor with a monkey, and he returns to the garage ready.

The first thing, he goes out back, under a tree, crumbles the bread and piles up the crumbs, kneels there nearby and waits. It's quiet. He keeps his eyes on the pile, begins rocking gently back and forth, feels his coat moving on his shoulders, blood in his temples. He does it slow, humming, burns a little prayer written on the formaldehyde receipt on a bare patch in front of him, writes a signature in the dirt with the matchstick. His palms tingle, warm all the way up to the shoulder, that's good, like a little silver filament up each arm. The Divinity Student sits rock-still and waits.

A lizard appears through an overgrown gap in the wall. Expressionless with concentration the both of them watching the pile of crumbs, he's drawing the lizard with a quiet sound he makes in his nostrils, breathing the hot air out so as to make a pitch that sounds like straw rubbing together. The lizard likes that—it's brown, a foot long. Legs moving in circles it comes forward to get that bread; the Divinity Student's eyes go black; two

black clouds settle over his eyes, black clouds like swarms of flies, and up comes the lizard. It starts eating the bread.

The Divinity Student's hand whips out, strikes the lizard with certainty on the side of the head, sending it sprawling on its side, legs in the air—it thrashes and dies. The Divinity Student gets to his feet and runs inside, coming out again with the bag and a bucket. Hastily, he pops the tabs on the cans and pours the formaldehyde into the bucket, all of it, and then snatches up the lizard and eases it in, coiling it at the bottom of the bucket, his eyes tearing from the sourness of the stuff. With care, he lays a board over the bucket's mouth and weights it with a cinderblock. In a day or so, it'll be mature, heated in the sun. He pauses to draw a special mark on the bucket with charcoal, and turns towards Woodwind's.

The office is empty; the building is quiet. He's there, filling his ledger, every stroke of his pen scraping on the silence, until that is stilled too. The room is poising itself, something invisible is gathering—looking up from the page, it seems to him this place is more than empty, more than abandoned, that no one has ever been here, that he is dreaming the office, or that the office is dreaming him.

He pushes back in his chair and goes to the window, but outside the city is static and motionless; he can see no one. A set? Turning around, he examines the office, floor, walls, ceiling, furniture, all made of the same dull wood, stained black in places. The place could have been carved from a single block of wood, or maybe it grew this way naturally.

Pen and ledger rest waiting on his desk. Unconsciously, he puts his notebook into his pocket.

He rifles through Ollimer's desk, looking for the Catalog fragment.

What are you doing?

I'm trying to find that bit of paper Ollimer got from the tree the other day.

What paper was this?

A fragment of a Catalog of unknown words . . . the original was destroyed somehow . . . he showed me one of the entries once . . .

Shouldn't you wait for him?

I don't trust him. What I'm looking for now, he got it from an oro, the same oro who sent me to Magellan to learn the formaldehyde protocol—

don’t you remember?

An oro?

Yes—a tree spirit.

Do you mean to tell me that you’re breaking into his desk because you suspect him to be in league with trees? Trees that hand out Catalogs?

The Divinity Student starts slamming drawers in Blandings’s desk, and then Householder’s. Were they involved?

Then he stops. He’s heard something. Motionless, he tries to look out through his ears, finding only the sound of his breath, his heart.

But then, another tiny clinking sound, coins flattening on each other, through the wall.

Slowly, crumpling himself up into his hearing, he draws up to the wall, placing his feet with such care that not even a mote of dust is displaced, and presses his ear to the cool wood paneling.

The coins drop, one by one or in pairs.

He feels his face go hot and red, his collar tightens, for a moment he feels something like a fever thrum in his temples and along the seams of his cheeks and forehead, and his throat constricts around his breath. Something moves in his belly; he wants to shake or fall down, but he holds himself absolutely still, breathing through his mouth.

It takes him a long time, but he gets through the door and out into the hall, not knowing what’s happening to him—but there’s nothing at all. Everything is as it should be, and as it always was, except abandoned.

Then he hears it again, behind him, and he looks and there he sees it. He hadn’t ever noticed before, but here in this one place, the wallpaper is stretched tight over a door-sized hole in the wall. The heat and closeness of the past week has made the paper sag, and now the opening is visible. The noise comes from in there.

Dizzily, he steps forward and parts the paper with his fingers. The paper is red and velvet-feeling, opening easily along a seam, dilating without tearing to let him into the walls. The darkness grows transparent by degrees, and then he can see two candles burning on a tiny shelf set high above him. They burn before a small sepia photograph of a blank-faced woman with clear eyes, hanging on the wall, and beneath the shelf Mr Woodwind lies, sternly sleeping, hands folded on his chest, leaning against an upright board.

Will he wake up? The Divinity Student creeps forward, but again comes the rattling of coins, very near. Then he sees Miss Woodwind, sitting smiling beside a card table smoothly set with a white cloth, with a scales and a cashbox. A Chinese lantern sheds red light down over its tassels, makes her white dress glow red. To him it seems as if a veil or shadow lay between them, he can see her distinctly and yet she is vague as a blurred photograph. She extends her hand to him.

He waves his hands. “What?”

“Your notebook!” she says with a grin, and light flickers across her features, kaleidoscoping all colors from her lips and eyes, her temples, cheek’s hollow, and beneath her chin.

He hands it over, coming closer, into her fragrance, and he can see the perfume in a glassy fog around her. Miss Woodwind lays the notebook smartly on the balance. In a few moments she efficiently tallies the new weight of the book and compares it to the old, reckoning how many words he has collected by weight, and calculates his pay on a chart. She counts out seven heavy gold wheels from the cashbox and extends them, cupping the money on her fingertips, so that as she drops them into his palm, her nails brush his skin just barely, only just touching him. This is all she has to do. Now he won’t forget her looking up at him through the gleam of the gold, nor the touch of her hand. She smiles at him, pleased.

Another wrong turn, he looks around in anguish, lost. The streets weave sometimes changing direction; he’s recognizing the buildings, but the streets don’t match. The Divinity Student is following the train tracks, another passing in a blast of diesel pushing hot air and thick flakes of dust before it, electricity snapping at the synapses. These trains run aboveground, their tunnels burrow through buildings, not earth, roaring through restaurants, hotels, private homes, churches, libraries, hospitals. The Divinity Student is staggering, disoriented, sweating in the wake of the trains, thinking only that he wants to sit down with her at the table and watch her filling columns of words; he’ll gladly be a mirror-glass, simply to sit by her and watch, bathed in her cool breath; or a lens for her to see through, so that he could be frosted with the rays that beam from her eyes, and these ideas push everything else out of the way. Dimmed and confused, he boards the train.

Under him his seat is rocking, only lulling him further into reverie, they plunge into the bowels of some public building, lamps streak by in horizontal bars of light, a fetid smell creeps damply through the car vents, and through his faint reflection in the window he can see the tunnel walls falling away into nothing on either side, rusted parallel tracks lying brown on lifeless gray earth, rancid pools, and occasional lamplit islands, a few men in construction uniforms lying idle.

He rides for a long time, people pass through the car, men in suits, lictors, old women. Some boys horsing around.

Fragments, incomplete ideas, but he's sobering a little. They crash out into sunlight again, the train shrieks and complains—melancholy sighing of old metal—and stop at a tiled station with slanting roof of clouded glass. The doors hiss and roll open.

A hand seizes his arm and drags him out through the doors, before he can react they shut behind him and the train drags out into the street sending a car skidding into a heap of trash cans to avoid it. The Divinity Student turns and finds himself alone on the platform, but he recognizes the station now. Outside, he can once again find the familiar streets and buildings, and a familiar city once again.

From the Divinity Student's journal, more recently: "I see those cats everywhere now. Last night I think I saw an albino cat. Led me to an infirmary I had not seen before, eerie brick houses and sodium lights. Everytime I go out at night, there they are."

The garage was only two blocks away, he lurches in and drops onto the gutted frame of an easy chair. Now he's pulling himself together, finding that again. No more feeling whipped about, he cleans himself out—and then goes to the bucket out back. Who knows how long it's been?

He drags it inside and sits on the cement floor before it, shedding the day's last strange fragments, and watching sunset light gild his hand through a cobwebbed window. He removes the cinderblock and the plank. A cold, flat odor out of time, not emerging from the bucket but just all about him instantly, as if it was his own native scent, there it is. The monitor lies inside, already blanching, skin ribbed with folds.

He was brought here—to learn this. He doesn't know why yet.

No prayers now, only quiet, he reaches in, down, so that his fingers touch the bottom, bringing up the heaviest, richest lees on his fingertips, stinging cold and fuming on his hands and shirt cuffs. He does as Magellan had shown him; he atomizes the formaldehyde with a blow of breath, a nonsense word, sending it out like a sneeze, tiny droplets drift like snow in space, and he lets them fall boiling on his face. He breathes it into him.

For a moment he sits, feeling the vapor creep in his nostrils and down into his chest. A shadow falls past his eyes, a dry voice dusts his ears, whisper past ears into head, dry hands tug at the back of his eyes, clap behind nose, rustle in throat. Dry warmth settles on flesh and skin, cool to the middle, low to the ground, baking earth heats his belly, eyes watching the sides all the time, dry sounds, cracks and wheezes, grass parts in front of him, dry-faced insects scrabble away, dull thud of footsteps, giants streaming all around—light falls in sheets on his face, figures blazing ghosts around him, hollow ground and hollow air, empty noises, hollow, unmoored, gray-faced the Divinity Student tumbles down with his vision’s passing shivering on the garage floor.

# nine: the butcher

The Divinity Student wakes with a soft head, lying on a concrete stoop. He was dreaming, a river carrying him away; now he sits up shaking his head alarmed, doesn't know where he is—walked in his sleep. These are all symptoms of something . . . his mind is too foggy, he can't remember. Around him, a slanting narrow street with white walls flaring in the sun, small children in cotton trousers running to crest the hill kicking dust, cinnamon brown door at his back; he looks down and sees the notebook in his hand, his thumb still jammed tightly between the pages, holding his place. He opens it and looks at words he doesn't remember collecting but that touch his memory with vague suggestions—these two leapt at him out of a poolhall eight blocks from here; and that one floated down onto the page like a leaf, a woman speaking to her neighbor from a second-story window, and she let that one word drop clean and clear from a stream of unintelligible gabbling. Sleepwalking, he has collected them himself, without knowing. The Divinity Student stands up and counts—he has gathered more words in one day of sleep than in any day of waking. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

With uneasy steps he navigates down the street to a crossroads, chickens scattering in his path, complaining in his wake. A kerchiefed woman beats a rug in front of her house singing "La, li, le . . . " (thump) " . . . lu, lo . . . " and he asks her for directions. Red-brown face and fluttering hands heavy over her apron, her soft voice shows him in Spanish, goes back to hitting her rug.

The Divinity Student climbs ponderously up Horse Street. His body feels like a patchwork of ill-fitting parts. Tired of the desert, tired of the city, walking up the street feeling leaden and weak—make sure you survive killing yourself, that's the way to go, and the red-green light winks on in his chest like an eye in the heart and it all comes into him at once. It's too early in the story but he can't wait, he jackknifes twenty feet straight up and tears off across the roofs, rolling over steeples, around the chimneys, ripping

weathervanes and antennas loose, caught in his clothes he wears them like forgotten wire hangers, bounds over streets kicking up tiles, arms cartwheeling, face set a motionless stone mask, feet planting so hard he breaks through wood and plaster and down through someone's dining room table, he smashes it in two, spilling food, breaking plates, family too dumbfounded to—he careens through the picture window taking the sill with him wrapped around his neck—strong enough now to punch through brick walls, outrunning dust clouds, his shadow so strong it's cutting through the foundations of buildings and sending cobblestones flying up after him like a wake in water, nothing in him now but city and desert. Cars watching him make abortive gestures—"Don't try it—we'd be ashes before we got within two dozen feet of him—no good while the spirit's on him."

A scent of dead flesh twists his track, he goes flying into a butcher shop, a horse carcass, pelt and hooves, eyes staring, tongue dangling a foot out of its mouth, the Divinity Student sends the butcher block flying, picks the horse up with one hand and runs outside to the trough; a single kick punctures wood, sends water sluicing out. One-handed, brandishing the body overhead, he stops the hole with a stone, just picks it up and shoves it home, empties ten gasoline cans of formaldehyde into the trough and dumps the horse in, spilling sour chemicals, weathervanes, and the windowsill, and, too impatient to wait, he jams his head under the surface and grabs the horse by its ears, ramming forehead to forehead he glares into glassy eyes and strains the horse-life in through his teeth, sucks it out in one mighty inhalation. His head rears back out of the chemicals streaming, and he staggers back against the wall of the shop shaking, a horror of dust and water and the fit that's on him, people stopping, hands on throats and mouths as he drops to his knees eyes widening to the sun—so who does he run with now, and where, eating grass warm from the meadow or drinking from that trough once years ago, rutting in tree shade, pulling the bit down throwing the rider, now it's he who's doing the riding, the Divinity Student, his horse spirit boiling out of him as he shakes his head and droplets of formaldehyde spatter the crowd, snapping witnesses' heads slapping their faces with images of each others' past, and, terrified, they run like rats. The Divinity Student traces curves in the dirt with his hands and shoeheels, throwing up clouds of dust, and feels the spirit wrenching loose with a pull towards the sky. Red-green light dims and fades in his chest.

Teo Desden, the butcher, drags him sympathetically back into the shop and props him against the display case. The Divinity Student, soaked and exhausted, pants to catch his breath. Time passes, and he comes to himself once again.

So, the Divinity Student sits watching the butcher. Desden works alone in the empty shop hacking mutton; rows of sheathed cleavers and razor-sharp knives with smooth stainless steel handles hum on a white counter, making the room look like a surgery. Gleaming meathooks on a chain hang over his head, along the back wall, one red raw animal smeared with white marbling swinging in the currents from the overhead fan; smells like wet concrete and rain, a clean place, regular thocking sound of Teo's cleaver making clean bone splits, chops and ribs sliding along red streaks to nestle on lettuce in cool glass cases. The floor is checkered, the far wall one vast and spotless mirror—the Divinity Student notices that Desden stares at himself all the time he's cutting the meat, contempt drawing lines taut around his mouth, turning his glazed eyes inward. He's marked, his bare forearms and hands are scarred and cut in places, his lips and fingertips are badly chewed, and the Divinity Student sees how deliberate the butcher's carelessness is. Desden mutters something at himself and breaks the animal's back with one springlike hack of his cleaver. He tosses beautifully sliced slabs of meat into the cases, pulls on the chain to bring the next body around, gliding effortlessly forward on well-oiled wheels, pulls it clear off the hook and starts slashing recklessly at it, perfect cuts flying off and piling up neatly despite themselves next to him on the counter.

A car passes outside, the Divinity Student watches a fly zing in through the open door. With a speed that defies vision Teo uncoils, sending a four-inch steel blade silent across the room flashing once under the fluorescents and the fly runs right into it. Two black halves drop to the tiles, the knife lands on its handle on the sideboard and slides an inch to rest, just tapping the base of the mirror. Unsteady, the Divinity Student lurches to his feet.

"Don't worry," he holds up his hand and takes up the knife, "here you are."

He walks back to the counter and hands it over, a narrow streak of clear jelly marking the steel where it hit the fly. Desden thanks him, and the Divinity Student meanders unevenly to the door and brushes the two halves out into the street.

“Oh,” he turns back and makes his way to the counter again, holding his head. “Your horse . . . ” He reaches into his pocket for some money.

“It’s not important. It didn’t even belong here.”

The Divinity Student obstinately starts counting coins, but Desden reaches over the scales to close his hand. The butcher’s fingers are cold and dry.

“It isn’t mine, one of my suppliers used to ride it,” Desden takes his hand away. “ . . . He came here yesterday to sell me two sides of beef, but the moment I’d paid him we heard a scream outside. His horse was drowning itself in the water trough—we did our best to pull it free, but it ended up dead anyway. In the meantime, my supplier ran off with my money and stuck me with the damn thing.”

The butcher goes back to cutting, turns a moment and says, “You saved me the trouble of having to decide what to do with it.”

The Divinity Student looks to the door, his head fills with air and for a moment he clings to the counter.

“You’re in no condition to go out there.”

“May I stay here?” The Divinity Student turns a pale face to Teo. “I’m willing to pay.”

“You can sleep in the meat locker.”

The Divinity Student pays the butcher and sits at one of the tables, decorated with a small white pitcher of white and pink carnations. Eventually Desden comes out in front and hands him a glass of water, sits opposite.

“What do you do?”

After he finishes drinking, “I’m a word-finder.”

The Divinity Student produces his notebook, shows it to Teo. The other man scrutinizes last night’s page carefully. He points to “redactor”—eyebrows go up, “That’s a good one”—looks a while and hands it back. His expression is sad.

“I suppose it’s a good business.”

“I collected these last night while I was sleeping.” The Divinity Student looks abashed.

With a sigh and a nod, Desden goes back behind the counter and starts cutting up the bodies again. His expression hardens and he starts cursing at himself.

Time passes. The Divinity Student sits silent and dazed, not thinking about anything but vacantly staring out the door. He is trying not to think, for fear that thinking will carry him off, or exhaust him. Eventually, he musters himself enough to ask what time Desden closes shop.

“I may be going out again,” he says.

“I sleep upstairs in the back, just throw something at my window if I’m not down here.”

He nods and shoves a handful of meat into the grinder, sneers, “I don’t have any plans for the evening.”

The Divinity Student tilts out the door, street air hitting dry and yellow, just down the road and around the corner, colorless dirt road twisting down toward the middle of the city, shallow shadows under hissing branches. It’s quiet, the street narrows at the bottom, silent stones bearing witness. He passes the churchyard and moves to the mouth of the Street of Wax, pulled up short by a low whistle.

Just past the churchyard, along the treeline at the city’s border, he can see a column of white vapor moving, sweeping along into town; curiosity bringing him closer, he comes in, watches the train slow and pause amid the grating of brakes. Steam envelops the station, billows out into the courtyard, and gushes through gargoyles’ mouths as it pours over the chapel. A group of people veiled in black darken the platform, dry hands like branches in the air, to receive a casket from a Pullman car. Six dark men in suits bring the coffin. An open carriage bowered in back with wreaths and garlands emerges from behind the church, pulled by a black mare with a high black plume.

The Divinity Student watches them load the hearse; the horse bows its blinkered head to gaze at the cobbles. He thinks of the horse, Desden’s horse, and recoils himself at a terrible idea. As they load the coffin into the hearse he has an awful idea.

He measures his pace, turning deliberately from the courtyard, and following the Street of Wax once again to the plaza, and he denies that he’s thinking about what he’s thinking about.

Then, just outside Woodwind’s, in the alley, he stops to regard a handsome cat perched on a windowsill. It’s all in black save for a white spot at its throat, just like him—all black but for a bleached collar, vaguely phosphorescent, peering out from his heavy coat. The cat is green-eyed, as

is he, just sitting there, just looking at him. It tosses its head once toward a building off to one side and bounds past his shoulder, across the alley, disappearing. A hot wind snaps the tails of his coat; he looks both ways, up and down the boulevard, but there is no one. He slips into the building.

The lobby opens to him, scented with her fragrance, turning, and suddenly she's there, within inches of his face, watering a potted rubber plant. Looking at him, her eyelids flare a moment, head inclining slightly to the side; she can see something's happened. Then she relaxes, eyes almost closing, their color changing to purple, their luster deepening into distant facets, and she smiles brightly at him.

"You look different," she teases, and shakes her head, light strands of stray hair tapping his face like drops of rain. The Divinity Student looks down at her pearls and grins faintly.

Miss Woodwind seizes his ear, "Tell me what happened!" just cajoling him, still smiling, her breath spreads twin crescents on his spectacles.

"I walked in my sleep," a mock wince, his hands flutter at his side.

She releases his ear, but the contact brought her close. Her soft fingers had pinched his ear; her voice hummed through him.

The plant across the room needs water. He wanders up the stairs.

Householder and Blandings are playing dominoes in the corner; they ignore him—Ollimer rushes up.

"Could you do me a favor? I wouldn't ask otherwise, but I don't know who to turn to . . . "

The Divinity Student tells him to wait, sits down at his desk and copies out his ledger, Ollimer all the while running fingers through his copper locks, cleaning his glasses, rubbing his palms on his vest, swaying from foot to foot. The other two rattle their dominoes and mutter to each other in subdued voices.

He finishes quickly and strides out the door, Ollimer following closely. "Please accompany me to the house . . . "

He knows what to expect. They pass through the empty lobby and out into the alley, shooing dogs away from the door. With a furtive casting about for witnesses, Ollimer leads him back, quiet, glancing over his shoulder, nervous, and sad.

Ollimer's parlor. The Divinity Student enters slowly, expecting the other man to trot out the wallet, produce the next fragment of the Catalog. With a stricken look, Ollimer gestures vaguely to the corner of the room, his aunt's body is leaning up against a chair, stiff as a plank. Her eyes and mouth are open, her flesh looks like blue cheese. She's been awkwardly dressed in a fraying gray terrycloth robe, twisted, plastered, and strangely wrinkled in her nephew's haste to cover her. Her feet are curled up like two pillbugs.

"I'm terribly sorry to trouble you, won't you please give her the last rites? You're the only religious person I know."

Ollimer cuts him off as he opens his mouth, "No priests—they all hated her, she wouldn't want a priest."

"All right. Does she have a bedroom?"

"Thank you so much, at the end of the hall, the door's open . . . " Ollimer's gratitude pours out, meanwhile the Divinity Student hauls the old woman into his arms and turns in time to see Ollimer heading for the door.

"Get back over here!"

The other man freezes.

"Idiot! I'm not going to do everything for you! Now get in there and shut the curtains, and get the damn bed ready!"

Ollimer bolts down the hall like a scared rabbit, the Divinity Student swaying behind carrying the body. She's heavy-soft like a cushion, all save her neck, her head stiffly upright, eyes pasty and dull, turning blue about the lips. In the dark of the hall a dim light shining through doughy flesh becomes visible just at the center of her head, he can see drifts of shining dust in her mouth and nostrils.

Just at the threshold of her room her weight seems to double and the Divinity Student stops, almost losing his balance. Her dead eyes roll in her head and the corners of her mouth turn up. She stares at him, winks an eye and grins wider. He steals a glance at Ollimer, who's lighting candles with his back turned, then looks back at the body—she follows his eyes and draws air through her gums with a sticky sound, hushing him, a little secret.

"Quiet, stupid," he says and slams her head hard against the door jamb. Her head drops, she goes still.

The room is small with rose wallpaper, the floorboards taken up in the corner, water rushing far below breathing mist up into the room. With care,

he lays her down on the bed and straightens her robe. Not a large woman, wouldn't take too much formaldehyde to pickle—and that's enough of that!

"You," he takes Ollimer by one shoulder and manhandles him to kneel at the foot of the bed, "stay."

He leaps onto the bed, pulling a hammer from his pocket, and starts pounding nails all along the top of the headboard. In a moment, he turns and drives another row of nails into the footboard, Ollimer wincing as the hammer falls within an inch of his face. No time to waste, the Divinity Student withdraws a fistful of wires and some pliers from his pocket, and starts stringing wire from nail to nail over her sodden body. With much slicing of fingers and screeching of metal he draws the last one tight.

Then the Divinity Student stands over the body with the Holy Book in his hands. He sets himself on his feet, kneading the cover a moment with his hands, then opens it, to watch letters flicker on rippling pages in wan yellow light. He lets the words out into the room, lets them hum through the wires strung across the bed like a tone across guitar strings.

Air trickles out around her teeth and the hollow of her mouth humming in the walls and bedframe, rattling the windows, buzzing in the cords strung tight above her, draft reeking of stale ice, words bubble from her lips, shaped somewhere deep in her chest—but Ollimer doesn't hear. The Divinity Student bends down to listen . . . only silence, wires blurred but quiet. The room goes dark, he can see her head lit up like a paper lantern, thin curtains of flesh shining orange from inside, out of her gaping mouth, lights shining on the threads, passing up and down their length like mercury in a thermometer. He passes his hand over her face—the words stop, the light winks out. He signals Ollimer to get up.

"Thank you," Ollimer is fumbling in his pocket—the Divinity Student knows what he's got. " . . . here," a familiar-looking scrap of paper.

Ollimer insisted that the two fragments stay together, that the Divinity Student could not keep it; the point wasn't pressed. Later, the Divinity Student couldn't recall the word itself: *mermeral* or *mermarescent* but definitely with *mermer* or *mermar* in it, with this definition, handwritten:

A prince, or a prisoner, on his deathbed remembered for the first time a childhood incident. Wandering in his ancestral home, he found himself in the dining room. Up until that time he had only seen it at night, in the company of adults, and now, daylight revealed it to be a false room—the

windows were plain white paper, the furniture, decorations, even the plants, were all props, hastily slapped together, where they had seemed so fragile and elegant before. Upon leaving the room he found the house was empty. Then he died. The boy is a man remembering, on this one occasion, he is dying.

Again, the same disorientation, vertigo on the edge of the paper, words written as a guide toward an obscure center—

"This is my payment?"

"Don't put it like that!" Ollimer comes up to him, hands open in supplication. "I'm very sorry—"

He brandishes the Holy Book and seizes Ollimer by his collar. "You're going to be sorry for real this time if you don't tell me who's putting you up to this!"

Ollimer squirms. Perspiration oozes on his forehead.

"Baiting me! What is it—is there a schedule, do you give me a fragment a week, and more and more? And then what happens? What happens then?"

"Let me go!" Ollimer casts fearful eyes up at the book. "There was only one left to go after this one! They're getting ready to tell you everything—you know as much as I do! You can't possibly blame me for this!"

The body on the bed emits a high arching wail, the Divinity Student hurls the book at it hard, striking it across the forehead. The wailing stops. Dragging Ollimer with him, he staggers over to the bed and reclaims the book.

"Well, I think we're going to wrap this one up ahead of schedule. I think I'm going to go straight to the source this time!"

Ollimer actually relaxes. "Yes, all right, that's a good idea."

The Divinity Student releases him gingerly. Ollimer looks as if he'll faint.

"I'll relay your wishes and get an answer—"

"You'll tell me now."

Ollimer deflates. With an effort, he turns to the desk and scribbles a name and address, sweat spattering the wood and scattered notes.

"Here," he croaks, holding out a crumpled paper covered in botched handwriting.

The Divinity Student puts the book away, takes the paper, and walks out the door without looking back.

# ten: the mission

So the Divinity Student. whittles away the daylight hours in Desden's meat locker, alternately watching the Saturday crowd marketing up and down the road through the doorway and playing hide and seek with the address Ollimer had given him. He puts it away for a while and then picks it out of his pockets again, stares at it without seeing, then folds it up, making shapes, being bored, paper

gets rattier and more crinkled until he can barely read it in the dull glare filtering in from the shop. He avoids making a decision by counting tiles on the wall and calculating how many checks there are in the floor, then how many black checks and how many white checks and trying to reckon their length and breadth measuring in hand-widths. It won't be until sunset that he'll make his decision, whether or not to go. He's been missing nighttime, and being able to look up at the sky without burning his face, so he'll wait.

Watching Desden he notices something. Every time a woman comes into the shop he tenses up, and just as she's turning to go out the door again he'll raise his hand and just wave at her a little. He waits until she's almost all the way round with her back to him, but not so far that she couldn't possibly see him, only enough to make it improbable that she would see him. The expression on his face—he'd jump under the counter if he was caught. But every time, like clockwork, that tiny wave at the turning head, hair and shoulders and curve of her cheek, a glint of her eye framed with lashes, then he goes back to his cutting, always watching the mirror as he cuts, staring hard into the glass.

Eventually, the Divinity Student gets up and meanders into the shop. Teo is sitting on a folding chair, knees spread over a bucket, plucking chickens with a sour, bored expression. It's dimming outside, orange lights coming on at crazy angles along the street, pedestrians pass in glowing white cottons.

"I'm going out for a while," he says.

“After I close up I might be able to find you a cot.”

He thanks the butcher and swings out the door into wine-colored air, his collar goes phosphorescent blue-white, and he looks up into cool azure sky and first pale lights, air stirring slightly with spare desert smells. He settles down, and sets off to meet Ollimer’s contact.

Behind him, a mush-faced little girl is watching the shop, sees him leave. A fly is buzzing in and out of her mouth.

He dawdles and hangs about, taking time to investigate back alleys, cockfights, musicians; he stops at a corner to eat bread and cold water, indulges himself with a stale plum-sized sugar skull branded with his name.

The address belongs to a house standing alone at the edge of an athletic field, an oversized brick box with one door in the middle of its face, and one narrow window immediately over it, resembling nothing so much as a cyclops. No lights nor mailbox, only a chain-link fence and concrete path. He knocks on the door and it swings open before him on an empty hallway lost in a vast unlit building. With a little investigation he discovers a pair of fine fishing lines running from a hook on the back of door to a motor, poorly concealed behind a bust on the hall table. The cobwebs on the bust are artificial.

Swift footsteps herald his appearance: Fasvergil floats up out of the unlit murk of the house into the paling orange light of the single window.

“I was told to expect you. You have been extremely impulsive.” Fasvergil’s voice is dry; it rustles along the walls like dead leaves.

“The power went out only a few moments ago.” He deftly lights a storm lantern, a column of light touching his saturnine features. Fasvergil is wearing his ordinary black habit. Chalk-dust still powders his sleeves and shoulders. Beneath, his thin ankles descend from the hem into small dark shoes.

“Shut the door.”

The lamp draws him in after Fasvergil, and as he immerses himself in the depths of the house he can see that the entire place is one vast chamber separated by high partitions, supported like stage flats by chains hanging from the ceiling. Their footsteps echo over their heads, and meet an answering tick of a hidden clock. Emerging into the vast central parlor he sees it is a lumberyard of carnival haunting-props from cannibalized ghost-trains, mired half in shadow, in failing light, like shipwrecks: dressers’

dummies leaning in the corner next to a skeleton, glass eyes on a shelf, chain-bound books with uncut pages next to a crystal ball on the table, all cluttered with deliberate disarray and aged with tea stains and fake dust. A heavy grandfather clock raps solemnly in the corner, and a dull bread smell comes from Fasvergil's dinner, sitting in a pool of light from a wine-bottle candle on a card table; he pulls a Chinese screen across that corner of the room and brings the light out, setting it on an endtable.

"Sit," he says, indicating a ponderous armchair. The Divinity Student obeys. Fasvergil takes his seat and fixes him with a baleful look.

"Looking there on your left, just on top of that pile of books there, you'll find the third fragment Ollimer told you about."

Fasvergil points obligingly with a long, weary hand—the Divinity Student looks around and pulls a thin sheet of folded paper from between two featureless volumes. The page has been prematurely aged with tea stains. He looks up and sees Fasvergil watching him, and while he knows he is being manipulated he cannot resist reading the page. Silent in his chair he reads a word meaning:

A very aged man finds again the love he lost as a youth. As he moves to embrace her, he is suddenly transported to a lightless place. He can feel a cool, sterile wind blowing upon his face, a numbness in his limbs. Nearby are shrieks and mutterings, unseen yammering things surrounding him on all sides. After an infinite time he wakes beneath a tree, when a raindrop, a single one, drops into his right eye. When he understands that all he had just experienced was merely a dream, he walks into a river and drowns himself.

He reads, and he feels Fasvergil trying to read him. A headache developing, the page turning gray and blurring a little as he reads. The Divinity Student is struggling to keep the vertigo from showing. Inside he feels a yawning sensation, waked and tantalized and he wants to seize Fasvergil and shake the rest out of him sheet by sheet, scrabble into a corner and roll himself up in them; these unknown ghost-words leave him clutching the air. Catching himself swaying he throws a look at Fasvergil. "What have you done to me?"

Fasvergil's look of surprise is unfeigned. "What?"

"Where does this come from?"

Fasvergil collects himself and says, "Ollimer may have told you that these are all fragments of the Catalog of Unknown Words, compiled by a

man named Schroeder and a small team of mediums, word-finders like yourself—this was many years ago—at any rate, from what little evidence endures, we know that Schroeder destroyed the Catalog just before he committed suicide. The other word-finders were dead by this time, or died shortly thereafter, and it is possible that Schroeder may have killed some of them himself, presumably to keep the secret of the Catalog."

The Divinity Student feels a weighty, obscure pressure fasten upon his head, and clutches at the armrests. All his powers of concentration are focussed on Fasvergil's words.

"The fragments to which you have been exposed were found among the possessions of a man named Chan, one of Schroeder's word-finders, who was found dead in his hotel room." Fasvergil is nodding his head and steepling his fingers, reciting, "I acquired them myself, and I've been rationing them to Ollimer to give to you."

"You were baiting me . . . " and now, slowly, it starts in his throat and fans out cold at the edges settling into him, " . . . you want me to resurrect the Catalog for you."

Fasvergil's face goes dead-sea calm, remaining just affable enough. "With the training you have received from Magellan, you could walk directly into the memories of any dead man, and bring them back—specifically I mean the words, that is, you of all people can bring them back again."

Even though he doesn't trust Fasvergil—he's been set up: go into Magellan, find out how it's done and then bring that back, now do it for *us*, young man, Magellan wouldn't, but *you* will, won't you?—even though he has a dirty feeling of being used and puppeted by his own teachers—there's a cold tang that billows through his head like frigid, early morning light. For this he came to San Veneficio, and the job as a word-finder, everything has been preparatory to retrieving those words. Now, understanding everything for once, he is in a position to choose with open eyes. The pressure at his temples spreads to mantle his shoulders and flatten his arms to the chair.

"You've read about the Eclogue," Fasvergil says, hanging his words carefully in the air. "These unknown words of Schroeder's are its vocabulary, we believe. 'Eclogues' are dialogues between shepherds. *The*

Eclogue is the dialogue of the shepherds of *men.* That is our conclusion. You are in a position to prove it."

Fasvergil seems oblivious to the Divinity Student. He sits motionless in his chair, his large, colorless eyes fixed on empty air, he speaks as if he were reciting his catechism.

"The Eclogue is the essential substance, or first cause, of creation, and is the source of all renewal. It is much like an invisible fundament that buoys everything up. Also, it is the communion or synthesis of all natural forces."

"That's what you think," the Divinity Student says to himself.

"It is a mystery and will forever be unfathomable to mortal understanding—our purpose in sending you to find these words is not the deciphering of the Eclogue. That is not our goal, and regardless it is an impossibility. Rather, we at the Seminary feel that a more comprehensive semantic understanding of the basic qualities of the Eclogue will enable us to convey the essence of its mystery to the uninitiated more precisely. We must, in short, strive toward an apprehension of what the Eclogue is not, and by filling in the darkness around it, develop a corresponding conception of what it is—without pursuing the folly of a direct definition. Then we may create a precedent, whereby the knowledge of the mystery of the Eclogue may be transmitted in such a manner as to preempt misunderstanding or heresy. Do you understand?"

The Divinity Student nods. Fasvergil has just named the stream that runs through his head, right through and behind, just obscured by himself, in his blind spot. Whether he understands or not, Fasvergil is asking him to remove that blind spot for both of them, as if that were possible. The Divinity Student will get closer to the Eclogue. He tries to dissemble, appear disinterested and force Fasvergil to bargain with him. But even as he hides his feelings he knows he must not refuse—this is his mission.

"Will I be allowed to keep what I find?"

"Provided I receive copies of *everything*," he gives him a frosty look, "that you find; naturally any notes you take are your own."

Time passes. They look at each other, clock ticking, dust gathering, this is what he came here for, and heart in his mouth the Divinity Student says, "I'll do it."

Fasvergil nods at a foregone conclusion.

“If you will look to your left, in the upper drawer of the end table, you will find a list of the word-finders and where their bodies are buried. Your procedure in probing them is of no consequence to us, but I am under orders to exact from you at this point your most solemn promise that, in the event of your capture or arrest, you will not under any circumstances mention your affiliation to the Seminary or the Mission with which you have been entrusted.”

The Divinity Student takes the list and swears.

As the sun settles overhead the Divinity Student steals away from Fasvergil’s house. He’s walking quickly, holding his legs out stiffly, and his face is pale and drawn. There are dark blue circles beneath his eyes. He imagines himself growing a second pair of eyes, ghost eyes, animals with the power to see the future, look into a mirror to wake yourself. A maze of streets opens before him like a jigsaw puzzle, and he meanders in and out of alleyways and private homes, beneath balconies and gargoyles, but the city walls seem to close in tightly about him, crushing him in a thin envelope of space, and reducing his path to smaller and smaller circles, going about the same landmarks and places again and again faster and faster. Fighting vertigo and intimations of nightmare, he pushes himself harder, trying if possible to force his way through the streets, but they catch at his effort and pull him down to the pavement. For a moment the buildings swim and dodge away from him and his head goes light, and then he is tumbling head over heels, unable to trace the course of his various parts to the ground. Before the blackness swells absolute, he can dimly sense low music muttering around him.

When he comes to himself again, he is looking into the seamed face of a stranger. Other faces peer over the stranger’s dark shoulders, thinly draped in a frayed linen shirt. The man is speaking but his language is unfamiliar. Whoever it is has retrieved the Divinity Student from the middle of the street and set him leaning against a wall, cradling his head with his hand.

The Divinity Student looks dazedly from one face to another, and then in a moment is filled with gratitude, and from this gratitude he gathers his wits again. He draws himself to his feet sliding upwards along the wall, and follows the men toward the music. There’s a sizable circle of people down one alley, playing instruments. One man has a guitar that he is playing

upright. The rest clap and sing in their language. Standing there in their music, the Divinity Student feels calm. The feeling is intense, it reminds him how long it’s been since he’s felt calm. Like a rush of involuntary memory he recognizes the hymn, which he has learned a long time ago in another language. He tries to sing it himself, but his voice is rusty and unpleasant. He stands silently to one side and rests, listening. He imagines the Eclogue holding them all in barely palpable tension.

# eleven: the gardens

Earlier, the Divinity Student had encoun- tered those two dogs at Woodwind's again. He had been called in to meet with the old man himself, who had commended him on the sleepwalking words, and given him a bonus. Coming downstairs again, they had been there waiting for him, tongues hanging out, one a bitch, the other not. They had stood there, watching each other, the Divinity Student poised on the third step. Then he had let himself fall forward, just falling forward with his arms out, with his hands straight and flat stretched out like blades, and just falling as a tree would fall he had driven his fingers down, impaling them, splintering their spines. He had risen unhurt, and then spirited them downstairs and out of the building in a sack. He ran all the way to Teo's place, pickled them, and then, behind the butcher shop, he had taken them both at the same time, while the sun set over the roofs, and he got to know everything they had been together.

The experiment finished, now he's clean. He's washed it away, no formaldehyde smell left, he had scrubbed it away in a spasm of restraint. He'd wanted to get another horse, or maybe a bird, but something bigger—even one of the great monitors in the desert—but perverse discipline had told him to keep off. Chan would be his first assignment. Fasvergil had explained:

"The human memory is vast and obscure; specific recollections of any kind beyond the most basic experiences are extremely difficult to locate under even the best circumstances. Therefore, as the last moments are the most immediately accessible to the investigator, it's best to start with Chan—while his role in the compilation of the Catalog was minor, he's the only one who seems to have died thinking about it, so the desired information will be closer to the surface with Chan than with any of the others on the list. Going to Chan first is also advisable in that he's also the most recently deceased, his memories will not have sunk as deep as those of the rest."

Eyebrows rise, index finger lifts:

“Moreover, Chan will provide you with a test, whereby the use of your training upon human subjects can be evaluated and criticized. I have it on the best authority that his body is in an excellent state of preservation, no significant decomposition. I shall expect you to report to me by the end of the week.”

“Too many reasons,” the Divinity Student says to himself. “Who is he trying to convince? Let him tell me what to do and forget the reasons.”

Wrapped up in his thoughts, he wanders around San Veneficio, pays his way into the Gardens, and wanders there. Small paper lanterns and candles are hidden in tree boughs and bushes, throwing webbed shadows across the paths. It’s busy, people milling on their evening constitutionals in a soft night-time darkness, humming with sourceless cricket sounds. The Divinity Student skulks along the edge of the grass in his heavy coat, remembers haunting the bushes as a child, choosing his moment and ambushing, then running off through the plants, impossible to pursue. He’d have been happy to see himself grown up in this park, large and black like a spectre lurking at the edge of the path.

Incongruously he remembers the Seminary as it was for him when he was alone—dappled tree shadows on buildings waving at night, blue light in high little windows where magic was being done, a faint whispering above the world that would sometimes drop tiny leads down like cut wires live with current. The Divinity Student wavers on his feet.

People drift by in evening clothes, with parasols, not a few children run by and give him a gratifyingly wide berth—being taken for a spook amuses him in a bitter, spectral way. Looking around, everyone looks ghostly in the shaded witch light from the trees and lamps, drifting fluorescent whites and darks fading in and out of the greater patches of shadow, voices now sourceless like the crickets, but sometimes breaking off, becoming discrete, and passing him, often with a trace of scent or a brush of air stirred by passing bodies. It’s as if the pedestrians and passersby are shaded from him by a thin tissue of luminous color, and they pass behind it throwing flickering lights across its surface.

At the center of the garden there’s a pool cased in a basin of perfect glass, one hundred feet across at its diameter and three feet of water at the perimeter, deepening to six in the center. Beneath the clear glass floor there’s a huge kaleidoscope with powerful lamps underneath, spangling

patterns across the water and up onto trees leaning overhead, sending patches of light gliding from leaf to leaf and across limbs, skimming over outstretched faces and hands. At night, translucent or luminous fish are released into the water, and freak freshwater cuttlefish three feet long changing color to match the dancing lights beaming up at their bellies, no sooner camouflaged then the pattern changes and again they change, free drifting memories of the former colors and patterns shifting again and outmoded again. Finally, at the center of the pool, a large freshwater octopus sits immovable, stirring the water with his tentacles, watching the people watch him with blank bilobed eyes; a single valve in its side opens and closes languidly—it's the heart of the pool.

Miss Woodwind is watching the octopus. She's by herself, leaning on the glass rim, lights filtering through the water to catch in her hair and flicker in her eyes and off her teeth, tracing like fingers the contours of her face and body, tinting her nails and soaking her clothes. The Divinity Student smells her before he sees her, soft on soft air, her fragrance sweeter for not being boxed in the office. Not moving, she's staring at the octopus, meeting its gaze directly.

She doesn't look when he comes up. "Would you look at it?" pointing, "look at the way it hovers there."

Now she favors him with a bright face—"How beautiful it is!"—and goes back to watching it.

The Divinity Student nods absently, looking at her. She's dressed like a schoolteacher, but excited like a little girl. All alone and she comes here; he's never seen her outside the office like this, nor has he ever seen her with friends, although he had assumed. He looks closely, and he finds on her face the kind of enthusiasm that is cultivated alone and rarely displayed to anyone but strangers, and he feels honored to be given access to her privacy. She watches the water, and he watches her.

Then she notices him again. "Oh, you!"

He turns his face to the pool and the water lights, puts his hand on the cold glass, but he's trying to think of something to do. Already, she's muttering to herself and drifting off; he has an impulse to plunge his head into the water. Instead, he immerses his hand and brings it out, freezing with cold water, letting it spill in long clear festoons from his fingers.

Unsatisfied, he does it again and again, staring at ropes of water encrusted with lights.

“Looking for something?”

“You’re a word-finder,” he says, gasping because the cold makes his fingers hurt, “you’re the best of all of us . . . ”

“You’re flattering me?” She looks like she’s getting ready to grin.

He shakes his hands sending droplets pattering on the glass. “You were looking at the water, so I thought perhaps some of your talent could have rubbed off.” That sounds desperate.

“Rubbed off into the water? How superstitious of you.”

“I only want to be as good as you are.”

That was bald enough to evoke a grin of surprise. Her face opens a little in curiosity. She mutters a response; he doesn’t hear. He sees her interest reawaken. Papers rustle in his chest.

And so they walk together. Her eyes fixed at some vanishing point on the horizon, walking with her hands behind her back, and his following the changes movement makes in her, as the lights pass and fall behind, and she changes all colors, reminds him of the kaleidoscope. She’s speaking to herself under her breath all the time. Then out loud she says:

“You know, I shouldn’t worry if I were you—the last few batches you’ve brought in were remarkable.”

He nods.

“It must be difficult, or perhaps you’ve found some special place where the words dangle from the trees, waiting to be picked . . . ?”

There’s something suggestive in her tone.

“Playing dumb?” she still isn’t looking at him. “ . . . I know where you get those words.”

He hadn’t submitted anything from the Catalog, he’d forgotten each word as the fragments left his hands—but he might have remembered them in his sleep.

“You walk in your sleep, so you hear words that people say without knowing they’re saying them. I’ve seen you in the plaza mooning about like a ghost. You stop every few moments and scribble things in your notebooks that no one else would have heard. I know your tricks.”

She hasn’t turned to him once, but she walks beside him as if she knows exactly where he is. Headlights sweep over one corner of the gardens; they

flash in his spectacles and then he's speeding invisible down a side path chased by a wild car horn blaring from the street, birds burst shrieking from the trees overhead. But the light passes; unsatisfied, the car pulls away. The Divinity Student looks around for Miss Woodwind, and she's right there beside him, smiling pleasantly up at him, with her arms crossed.

"You're right to avoid them—they're driven by demons."

"They've been after you?"

One eyebrow raises. "No, but I've seen them do their business. You watch out!" She taps his chest with a finger.

For a moment they sit still in the shade, listening to the crickets, her lips moving quietly to herself. Her face is mostly hidden, lights from the street shining between the leaves illuminate one high smooth cheek, garlanded with wisps of glowing hair.

"Come on, I'll show you something!" and she hurries off over the grass, under the trees.

They follow the course of a stream along a rocky path overgrown with vines, Miss Woodwind knifing through the bracken unhindered, the Divinity Student shredding and tearing behind her. No matter how he tries to catch up to her she always keeps ahead of him; his feet feel like blocks of clay dangling awkwardly at the end of his feet. He redoubles his efforts and presently walks directly behind her. By planting his feet precisely in her footprints he avoids the pitfalls.

One by one the lights dim and vanish, along with all sound of voices, wood and the smell of wet earth close around them, the city melting far behind. He follows her smell and the whispering of her voice with a sensation much like shifting from one dream to another. Trees get denser on all sides; he senses that no one has ever been back here before, pressing in toward an oasis older than the city.

A wind comes up and a roaring sound, she points. "There!"

She turns her brilliant face to him framed in a halo of hair. "It's the source of the stream!"

Just beyond her pointing finger a great spiraling channel of water gouts up out of the ground, cutting straight for the rocks and the gorge upon whose rampart they are standing. Trees stand all about the waters' edge following with their branches the flow of current, the air curiously stirred here by the speaking of the water at the center.

“I’ll show you the way,” Miss Woodwind’s voice is perfectly audible over the noise. She weaves along the bank of a small tributary up to the main pool, an eddy where the flow is quiet, where the water is filtered through old tree roots and between rocks. One boulder shows a flat face and that’s where they sit down, both turned to confront the stream bursting shouting out of the ground. Miss Woodwind looks at the Divinity Student for a moment, and then favors him, bending to cup her hand under the surface of the pool, bringing it up full, a bowl barely dripping.

“If you really want to soak your head, you should dunk it in here.” She offers him the water, and when he hesitates she grabs the back of his neck and shoves his face into her cupped hand. He drinks soberly, and all the while she watches him with her lips moving, speaking softly and warmly to herself. She draws more water and he drinks from her hand again, motionless, bowing over her palm, and Miss Woodwind turns her face up to see gray sky and metallic stars through a black web of tree boughs, and sees the talking water flashing by like smoke and lightning from its source. The Divinity Student laps droplets from her palm, and draws his face along her fingers, and she finds her hand still resting on his neck, and it goes soft and strokes his throat a little. He looks up and she turns him toward her, drawing her water across his face with her hands, and bringing him in close, the things she tells him, she tells him, and tells him.

# twelve: chan

Slabs of crushing heat fall and shatter on San Veneficio's shoulders, boiling back from the empty ground outside its walls to surge up the streets, churning into doorways and bulging against gray window glass like sheets of mercury. The great herds of giant monitor lizards are shut deep in the desert's recesses, where the blast of the sky's open oven is only a thin whistle of stirring dust and broiling plants. All along the city streets green leaves wither yellow-brown, in cracks, and, overhead, copper domes and gilded spires slant blazes down onto the streets, refocusing the sun. Magellan swings back and forth before his fractured window, while his familiars rub their velvety hands dubiously, watching him. When his couch swings forward to the summit of its arc, Magellan's wax-white face is only a foot from the glass, and as he falls backward he brings another part of the city back with him; San Veneficio trickles down vines of incense into his ears and the corners of his painted eyes, he can see the lowing, shrieking animal souls of magicians pacing invisibly on walls and rooftops, or weaving unseen between pedestrians' feet.

The Divinity Student can see them too, now, for the first time. He's walking down the center of Monument Street, so named for its many statues, some set on high pedestals, others standing on the curb, leaning against buildings, trees, and storefronts, or sitting on benches. Out from the shade, the Divinity Student stands full in the heat's hammering in his heavy coat, defying the sun, the passing cars, buoyed up, the cool water in him and running down his face. A cattish ghost-familiar wauls from a monument's bronze shoulder, seeing him see it, and he shrieks back in its own language, pulling a face so horrible that pedestrians scatter out of his path, their white cottons flapping. The spirit's eyes flash and it bolts down a drainpipe, and somewhere an old misanthrope, brimming with bitter malice, poised over some catastrophe, gasps and stumbles, shivering off to hide in a corner. The Divinity Student laughs a silent witch laugh after it, and multicolored throngs of animal souls up and down the street fan out to

avoid him, peeping at him in fear, irritation, derision. They, none of them, they don't challenge him.

At the end of the street he drops out of sight. Today he's getting ready for Chan. This morning, as he had passed beneath an oak tree, a card addressed to him had dropped into his hand from the boughs, inscribed with the location of Chan's grave, so he's heading for the chemist's—he's a regular by now—puts the two barrels of formaldehyde—"very fresh, this imported you know"—on account and takes a cab back to the butcher shop. Teo's retrieving a carcass from the meat locker, the Divinity Student walks in hauling the drums and shoves them into a corner.

"Assignment from the Seminary," he explains.

"You live an adventure," Desden says, retreating into the shop with the meat.

The Divinity Student zigzags across town buying specimen jars and surgical instruments, special saws, a shovel, bags, and a rickshaw handcart with money he'd received from Fasvergil, comes back a piece at a time and dumps the stuff by the barrels, in the locker, with the exception of the handcart, which he chains outside by the broken horse trough. Eventually, the day's baking is done, the sun going down runs crimson over the town, air thinning, and he draws up to rest a moment. Teo comes out of the shop.

"What are you going to do?"

"I need a favor."

"For your assignment?"

"Yes."

"Anything."

"The use of your shop, or a private room . . . I don't know for how long."

Teo comes closer. "What for? Secrets?"

"Yes," the Divinity Student leans forward off the wall, "what I did with your horse I'm going to be doing to people. I'm stealing the body of a word-finder tonight . . . I'm supposed to dig through his memories and find certain things he took with him."

"These things being special words? . . . I would assume that, since he was a word-finder."

"Yes, that's right."

"This is going to involve more than one corpse, isn't it?"

The Divinity Student pauses. "Yes, possibly as many as twelve . . . "

Teo suddenly gets excited. “Listen, the bodies, what are you going to do with them when you’re through?”

Shrugs. “I’d dump them somewhere. Perhaps rebury them if I’ve got the time.”

Teo comes closer still, eyes bright in the alley lights. “But you don’t need them for anything else?”

“I have to keep their brains, that’s all, everything else is waste as far as I’m concerned. None of them is going to be very fresh.”

Now the butcher pauses, his stained apron humming blue-white in the thinning sunlight. “You can use my shop, or my apartment upstairs, whatever—provided you let me help you.”

The Divinity Student remains silent.

“I have the shop and the rooms, I can be very useful to you. Just let me help, you won’t regret it, you’ll see—I’ll dispose of the bodies myself.”

The Divinity Student looks at him.

“Let me have the bodies when you’re through with them!”

“ . . . Why do you want them?”

“I’ll dispose of them for you! You can’t simply dump them, they’d be found and traced back to you. Reburying them would be just as obvious. If you let me help, I can get rid of them. They’ll vanish as if they had never existed.”

The Divinity Student grinds his knuckles against his head thinking.

“Please!” Teo hisses.

“All right . . . Provided you help with everything.”

“Yes!”

“May I use your apartment?”

“Yes!”

“And anything else I ask, you’ll do?”

Desden gives a small bow with shining eyes. “Your servant.”

“All right, ‘servant,’ help me load up the cart.”

Desden ignites like an engine, tossing shovels and equipment into the cart. He closes the shop early and runs after the Divinity Student, pushing the cart in front of him.

Together, they walk streets that weave crazy patterns, passing dice games and weavers’ looms on front stoops clacking out across the curb. And here’s the church quarter; the street is lined with small chapels on all sides, some

of them tucked into alleys, makeshift enclosures for tiny shrines, and booths selling incense, candles, prayers, offerings, flowers, nurture fires, and hymnals. With eventide approaching the crowds come out before dinner, in some places songs already rising out of doors and windows, but the people make way for the Divinity Student unasked. Hurry along quickly, out of the way and down to the cemetery.

A large, L-shaped building squats on that block, with a heavy black gate and yawning arch in place of a front door. Beyond, the graves lie marked, spread haphazard under dead grass. The gate's locked—the Divinity Student takes a metal rod out of his pocket, coats it with pink rose water from a little vial and starts rapping it against the lock. Suddenly, the rose water congeals and the rod freezes to the lock as solid as if it were welded there; the Divinity Student pulls the gate open using the rod as a handle, motioning Desden inside.

Chan's grave is marked and shaded from the street by an old oak. Desden points to the tree.

"I hope its roots haven't gotten into the coffin."

The Divinity Student cuts into gray dirt just in front of the tombstone, sending lizards hissing through the high blonde grass. The soil is loose and dry, crumbling to dust and clods, insects, smells like smoke. He's moving fast—his form smears, hard to see in the failing light—tearing up the soil like a machine. Teo looks around, but they can't be seen from the street, then he takes up his shovel and starts in behind the Divinity Student, pausing every few moments to catch his breath and scan the windows overhead, waiting to be caught. Twenty minutes later, in a rain of dirt, a spade grates hollow on termite pine. The Divinity Student scrapes the lid clean and motions Desden up onto the grass, gives a single heave and throws the coffin out of the grave. He follows it out a moment later and wedges his shovel blade under the lid. One ratchet of his arms and it slides off, splintering desiccated nails.

Mothball smell and sweet stench, Chan's suit is too small, deflated in the box but still a little damp, a white gecko stares up at them—he's been licking Chan's ear. The Divinity Student shoos him away. Reaching down, he embraces Chan's waist, hears a gurgling sound beneath his closing arms.

Desden hisses, "there's someone here!" and presses himself against the oak.

The Divinity Student dumps the coffin back into the ground and leaps down with it. A light blazes in the twilight building looming by the gate, two people alternate passing by the window—two men, pulling on jackets, one packing his briefcase at a desk.

“The bag!”

Desden tosses the bag down.

“Get down here now!”

Desden casts a fearful glance at the window. One of the men is laughing. The butcher slips quietly into the grave and helps bag the corpse.

“Just do it fast!” the Divinity Student says.

They toss the body back up out of the grave and leap out themselves. Teo dusts his apron but the Divinity Student seizes hold of the bag and drags it onto the cart, tossing the tools in beside. Above, the light goes out, stairwell lights flare in a column down one side of the building.

“Any other exits?”

“That gate is the only one!” the Divinity Student is spitting with anger. He kicks most of the dirt back into the grave and then tackles the cart, flying across the yard, with Desden running to keep up. Ramshackle, he tears up the earth over the graves, overturning tombstones and crosses, kicks a wreath out of the way, making for the gate. He bashes it open with the front of the cart, tearing the metal rod off in passing, and Desden shuts it behind him, the lock snaps. The Divinity Student is already halfway to the corner, Teo can hear voices ringing hollow, and nearby a door rattling—he sprints up the street and slams into the cart, together they send it hurtling up around the corner and down Rat Street.

Turning, they run down a service passage along the train tracks, their faces flashing messages to each other in passing orange work lights. Low thrumming sound, and the earth hums beneath their feet, the Divinity Student points, they duck into an alcove with benches for maintenance men as a train hurtles by like a thunderbolt only a yard away, earsplitting and spitting flying windows. Once it’s gone, they pull out and make fast for the nearest access tunnel disgorging them into night streets.

“Too many people here,” the butcher says.

“I’ll get in the cart, they won’t bother us.”

The Divinity Student leaps up onto the cart and sits beside the bagged Chan, putting his feet up on the corpse.

“You said you’d do anything, so push.”

Desden squares his shoulders and pushes the cart through the crowds. Finally, as the moon rises over the level of the rooftops, they draw up to Teo’s street. The Divinity Student jumps out and together they rush their baggage up the pavement and around to the back. Teo practically dismembers himself flailing with the keys, he finds the right one, shoves it home, opens up, and the Divinity Student rushes Chan into the shop. Teo runs past him, draws the blinds and pulls a heavy flat across the front of the store—even peering through the cracks, it’s impossible to see anything. He clears off the cutting board and heads back into the locker. The Divinity Student already has Chan out of the bag, stripped and ready, together they carry him out under the fluorescents and slap him down on the board. Teo puts on a fresh apron and starts rinsing the corpse, the Divinity Student runs out, comes back with a heavy jar filled with formaldehyde, mingling that sour smell with Chan’s new wet sweet smell.

“Just the brain—the less tissue, the faster the fermentation.”

Desden nods, yanks a cleaver out of his knife rack. With a few deft moves he shaves the front of Chan’s head, then swings up at arm’s length over his head and brings it down right on target shearing off the top of Chan’s skull with one stroke. A muddy, metallic odor is decanted, curling sluggishly in their nostrils. His sense of smell already powerfully sharpened, the Divinity Student quickens and leans forward, takes a good long whiff almost getting it right then and there, the whole thing, but no no it’s not enough, the formaldehyde is needed.

With the a genius of natural grace Desden whips out a small, wickedly sharp blade and stabs in through the back of Chan’s neck, putting his weight on it, driving between the vertebrae and then shifting his weight bringing the knife up—a sound of dry fibers severing like old corn husks. The spinal chord is cut. A few more dextrous disconnections and he puts away his knife. His cutting board and apron are stained with black tarry stuff, rancid bad-milk stink from the body. With care, Teo slides both his hands into the aperture at the top of Chan’s skull, feeling with his fingers for the base of the brain. Then, easy as bobbing for apples he draws the dripping, only slightly shriveled organ out of its case, complete and undamaged, with a thin queue of neatly cropped spinal cord at the bottom. With all the gentle concern of a doctor birthing a newborn he slips it into the jar. The liquid

takes its charge in silence without a single plip, closing solemnly over Chan. Gratified, the Divinity Student nods wordlessly to the butcher and steals upstairs to Teo's rooms. With grim pride, and a secret delight, Teo turns to watch himself in his mirrors. He starts hacking the body to pieces. This hand to his hand, this arm to his arm.

Desden has a few small rooms just past the uppermost landing, clean and bare, an odor of metal desks and office supplies. The Divinity Student sets the jar on the desk, turns on the desk lamp and sits in a cone of harsh blue light. He pulls his pen and notebook from his pocket, and uses the pen to stir the formaldehyde. Eyes locked on Chan, he can see thin filaments of yellow essence swirling out of the tissue, mixing—the smell is strong enough now to disjoint his body, intensify a feeling of being stitched together and soft in the head, of half-emerging from his own head. Shaking badly, he dries the pen and sets it aside for fear of dropping it in, staining Chan with ink. Clammy in the pit of his stomach and cobwebs threading down his arms and legs, he sits, barely contained, waiting for the fermentation to hold. Not much time but forever, thankfully the last memories are all that's needed, and he dips his hands into the blend—cold puckering his fingertips and boiling vapor off the nails; breathing hard now, he raises dripping palms and sprays sour fluid into his eyes, bedews his face —coming at him it's coming at him, blue light flickering out and it's got him, he's going into it, wrench and pull and for a moment hanging over the grass suspended between sky and ground tied to a cloud by a shining line flooding body taut and crushing the back of his skull cracking him open shrieking and nothing pulling at him to go into nothing passing through the nothing and he's nothing—and comes out the other end in a cheap hotel room, floor and carpet stretched on his face, his insides being hammered with a tapeworm thrashing in his stuffing, or Chan's, bones turn to white-hot glass and bend in ropes twisting arms and legs and ribs collapsing, re-expanding to collapse again. The Divinity Student pushes back in time, now Chan is breathing and he can feel something like hard bubbles drifting up through the floorboards, passing through him with cold angry pressure, and there in his arms and legs coming up through his abdomen, all of him going glass then marble then wood and carpet then back to glass going brittle and aching and acid searing in bone filaments and bubbles bursting out his back and through his head rolling like a ball clearing columns through his body.

The Divinity Student screaming and pushing, he's got the tearing at his throat, the air channel collapsing and shredding like tissue paper, trying to push further back, and as he rises free and watching Chan slobbering out his last breath beneath him, face all eyes and gaping mouth, as he's getting out, he latches on to one tiny part, he draws back just a little, only just a small bit, to Chan at the desk, Chan writing his notes, and the Divinity Student copies these notes, and watches a dark-haired lady drift in and leave many times, an empty thing day and night, all of life on the page, in the pen, sad writing at the borrowed desk, pause and stare at the bricks in the wall across the street, then turn and spread ink again, and sad, and write, and dark-haired lady, and eat, and sleep, and sad, and write—and Desden's room.

Back: returned, the Divinity Student sitting and staring, brought up short just blown in and spinning from the headlong rush of the Eclogue, new magic words humming on the pages of his notebook, and sad Chan's dead memories rest again on the desk in front of him, in a cone of harsh blue light.

# 13: the demons

The Divinity Student scowls through the window at a metallic sky turning cobalt-colored at the end of the day, strange high clouds moving fast. Behind him, Miss Woodwind is measuring his notebook on the scale, her neat hands setting weights with care on the balance. She comes out from behind her card table, moving toward him, holding the book in front of her and stabbing at him with it.

“You’ve torn pages out, I can’t get its proper weight.”

The missing pages, covered with Chan’s words, are wedged in the Divinity Student’s inside right upper coat pocket. Their typed duplicates were delivered this morning to Fasvergil, who received him sitting on a plywood tombstone, mending costumes.

He had extended his hand and let the sheets drift to his palm. They had seemed to catch and spin in the air as they dropped. Fasvergil had settled his needles and deposited them on the small shelf of a lectern behind him. He had said nothing, looking candidly at the Divinity Student, and then turned his eyes down to the costumes again.

“Sometimes the words get mixed in with gibberish. I thought you wouldn’t want them.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “Whatever it was you collected last night weighed more than this notebook and everything in it. Gibberish or not, we need those entries.”

“I threw them away.”

“You’re working for someone else.”

“I’m working for myself.”

Her face distorts. “I say you’re working for someone else!”

“Think twice before you accuse me of anything,” he says quietly.

For a moment Miss Woodwind returns his gaze, muttering under her breath. Air hisses through her nose as she hands him back his notebook.

“I suppose next time you’ll at least have the decency to keep separate notebooks for your separate jobs.” The corners of her mouth turn up, the air

around her is getting warm.

“Next time I’ll bring you everything,” he lies, “I’ll bring you my old exercise books from the Seminary.”

“Really?”

“Some of them.”

“Oh.” It’s not what she wanted. She looks off into a corner, listening to the office buzzing around them, the rustling of the wallpaper and the rattling of the windowpanes. Dust rains down on paper reams and book spines. Outside, he can hear cars roaring up and down the street and squealing across the plaza, swarming across the city like rats on a corpse, looking for him. He follows her eyes. They drift back towards him, then lock on his. He drinks her fragrance in, and the warm column of air in which she stands.

“No,” she says, “not when you ask me. Never when *you* want, only when *I* want, that’s the way it works.”

She raises a finger, looking like a schoolteacher admonishing. “Only when I want. You’re always working for me.”

And she turns to go, when he asks her to go walking with him. She rubs her hands a little. “I’ll finish a few things here, and join you on the corner.”

Later, she meets him, and together they march down through the plaza and into a part of San Veneficio he’d never seen before. Until now, it had seemed to be exclusively composed of hallways and lighted porches, low buildings. Now he is surrounded by towers, lights kaleidoscope as he passes, leashed to Miss Woodwind. The avenues are broad and black, fewer people, trains howl by on creaking trellises over their heads. She’s got him; he’s just realized the emptiness she makes him feel, as if a space with shimmering edges is yawning in his chest. It’s filled with vapor that emanates from her in thick gouts, pulling him along with her. Her breath, and the moist corners of her mouth, small, shining in the streetlights, rolling out silent words, and parting over her even, white, filmy teeth. Her fragrances, particularly from her hair, the close parts about her ears where her skin is especially delicate, where the scent goes dark and rich.

“Tell me about the Seminary.”

“It’s old. It was commissioned by a king . . . the last one to be canonized, I think . . . There’s a marble statue of him in the hall. Every year, we had to pay our respects on his birthday.”

“What classes did you take?”

“Languages, literature, history, what you’d expect.”

“Theology?”

“Of course.”

“ . . . Many different kinds?”

“There are thirteen disciplines.”

“How many did you take?”

“All of them.”

“What disciplines were they?”

The street passes, they turn a corner, no reply.

“I would have thought you could tell me.”

No answer. The Divinity Student lays his hand upon the Holy Book, holstered just below his shoulder, under his coat.

“Did your father train you in word-finding?” he asks.

“ . . . Yes.”

“What does he do now?”

She bites down on the words, but they won’t be dammed, even by her. “He still works—he finds words in books—”

“Hidden words?” He remembers the pages Mr Woodwind was soaking, how carefully he watched the color of the flame as they burned away, “—words written in secret?”

“—Yes.”

“Had much success?”

She’s trying not to answer; she can’t understand why she does.

“None.”

He takes his hand away from the Book, Miss Woodwind relaxes.

“You learned to do that at the Seminary.”

No answer. A cat, dressed in black and white like the Divinity Student, watches them passing.

“Don’t do that again,” she says, just quietly.

The Divinity Student nods his head.

Time passes, and she brings him up short before a billowing steam grate; delighted, she steps into the white column and beckons him to follow. In a close alley, with no one to see them, he follows her, and she’s smiling at him again, her face in condensation glows right in front of him. His face

alights on hers. She's smiling at him, indulgent, and she bares her shoulders, collarbone spread-winged and delicate, he kisses her throat.

She turns and leads him into the building—the office, they've come full circle—invites him inside, embracing him, murmuring happily to herself.

And later the Divinity Student is walking among white houses, shining like bones in the moon's arid light. Dampening every sound, their black lawns soak in dew by the road, their curtained windows are flat against their closed and dozing faces. When he looks up, there are two seven-year-old children in dirty shorts walking toward him on either side of the road. They freeze—air closes around the Divinity Student like a hot wet hand, chalk stuck in his throat, and he strains forward, his lungs pulling to open but drawing only vacuum. The moon goes impossibly white overhead and the sky darkens and turns transparent. He can see them, one a boy, one a girl, shaking with silent laughter, standing rigid by the side of the road, and the air around his head is crumbling into black pellets. In the distance, a pair of headlights stab into his eyes—there's a car coming fast down the road, still far away but speeding toward him. Pushed down by a weight, the Divinity Student stumbles against a wrought-iron fence, feet slipping on dewy black grass, seeing now that flies are swarming from their noses, burrowing out from the corners of their eyes, crushing themselves pushing between their teeth until their chins run with threads of black juice.

He can see more, now, the children's teeth are clamped shut their lips pulled back but not smiling, leathery fixed withered lips like mummies, skin on their faces brownish-black and cracking, silent, the laughter still bubbling up inside them making them shake, and now the flies are coming toward him, the Divinity Student, clutching at one of the rods of iron he forces his mouth shut but the cork in his throat slams down harder and his limbs coil back on themselves whipping around him, muscles snapped tight as piano wire, but he's struggling, the children laughing harder now, he can hear it, high pitched and hysterical, and the cackling getting faster and faster until they seem ready to fly apart, twisting at the knees, but his feet are rooted in place, and their fingers bend back and then snap one by one like wet twigs—the Divinity Student can see the stumps of black bone and blood popping out to splatter scattershot on the pavement, a drop of blood spats on his cheek, and, in a brief moment, he sees them, strangers to each other, emerging from their homes, running to the waiting car in obedience

to a wordless command to be used as instruments against him, moon intolerable, blinding now, and flies all around him matching their whine with the laughing boy and girl, in a moment the demon will be on him burrowing, and they clench their teeth so hard their jaws break lopsiding their faces with two synchronous wet snaps and their teeth are driven up right into the gum, blood coming out thick with bits of flesh, the rush of the car's engine thrums louder pounding in his ears and rattling the ground, and with shaking voice the Divinity Student suddenly starts reciting Chan's words. He speaks to unravel them and push himself free, without understanding what he says.

A fence rod tears free in his hand, and around him the flies begin to burst and spark like firecrackers crashing around his ears. The Divinity Student breathes again and starts to run away. The two children shriek and pound the street with their fists, but the words strike and rebound from their skulls and faces with a sound like metal striking stone. They stop laughing. They've been dead now for a while. The car's voice dies, the lights wink out. For a moment, they turn around on their toes slowly embracing the air; then they run as fast as they can, past the Divinity Student. But what they run from can't be outrun, and holding hands together they fall and blow away.

# fourteen: albert

Weaving his way over half-sunken pavings, a priest assigned to the chapel of St Sulpice walks among eroded tomb-markers, pacing toward the listing shadow of his rotting church. St Sulpice squats immediately adjacent to the city's lowest point, a convex basin at the base of a funnel, whose walls are a prison rampart of derelict, scarred brick buildings with broken windows. Hissing sewer grates flank the churchyard, bordering it on two sides with foaming gutters—a flimsy wooden bridge spans one of the sewage channels connecting the churchyard to the street, the priest had used this bridge himself a few moments ago. The chapel itself, foundering into the mud, is abandoned, smells of rotting stone and wet ivy leeching the walls. The priest is here to inspect the grounds, insure that the place still stands inviolate, and with cold hands he inspects the padlock and anchor chain that seal the doors, then turns to wipe thick sweat of rust from his palms. Stepping gingerly on soft earth he follows the perimeter of the walls, peering in the windows, but his eyes find only decay and hollowness inside.

He follows the convexity of the apse and picks his way along the other side of the nave—the silence breaks with the ponderous rattle of a handcart receding over the bridge. Dashing around the other side, muddying the hem of his cassock, he sees two men pushing away up the street, one man in gray, the other hunched in a heavy black overcoat. They are fleeing the torn grave of Albert the word-finder, open, still steaming beside a pile of dirt.

The Divinity Student hears the priest shouting after them and curses. He has a bottle of ethyl alcohol in his pocket—he tears off Albert's pant cuff, gags the bottle with it and lights the fabric, tossing it onto the bridge behind them. The fire bursts blue in the gloom, fire flaring purple-hearted over the wood. The priest has his pistol out and fires, bullets ricochet over their heads, Teo flashes him an inexplicable look, up the street empty and striped with intermittent streetlights they racket with a sodden bag sloshing in the cart, and the priest's curses fading into nothing behind them.

Teo has scavenged a small air pump from one of his discarded refrigeration units. The Divinity Student now rigs it with a hose and a hollow ring of metal perforated at regular intervals. He drops it to the bottom of the jar of formaldehyde, and Desden settles Albert's gluey brain gently on top of it. The air pump purrs quietly on the desk, sending up a coil of bubbles in thin mercury columns that babble at the surface. Teo withdraws downstairs, reluctant to leave. The Divinity Student—having correctly guessed that the agitation of the bubbles would speed the fermentation process—watches already the yellowy ropes of Albert's memory oozing from the tissues, mixing thickly with the chemicals. He rolls up his sleeves in the fluorescent light, and makes himself ready.

Downstairs, Teo is segmenting the soft, seeping body of Albert an inch at a time when he hears the noise. Rushes upstairs and throws open the door, the Divinity Student is crouched by the open window, chin and eyes running, glazed, oblivious. The pump and ring lie on the table, dribbling, the Divinity Student is holding the jar in one hand. With a horrible face he raises it to his lips to drink, and then vomits out the window, and drinks again and vomits.

"What are you doing—you're drinking it?"

The Divinity Student's voice is hoarse and thick, his nose is clogged. " . . . He's been dead longer than Chan . . . the words won't come clear enough . . . I have to look *closer* . . . " He shakes the jar in frustration. "I'm not getting enough!"

Desden looks at him. They look at each other, and then the butcher thinks of something.

"Wait, don't try it again yet." He holds up his hand and runs back downstairs. He whips a blade from the rack and walks up to Albert, neatly cuts off a strip of his liver and carries it back up to his friend.

"Swallow it."

The Divinity Student eyes him blearily, blinking water down his face.

"It may help you digest . . . "

He's waved forward from the floor. Desden gingerly hands him the morsel, and with a sour face the Divinity Student shovels it into his streaming mouth.

"Whole, don't chew it at all."

Throat working violently the Divinity Student nearly gags a moment but forces it down. Teo puts his hands on his shoulder.

“Wait a moment or two for it to settle, and then try again.”

Time passes. Teo retreats to the doorway. Compulsively the Divinity Student masters himself and drinks again. Teo watches his eyes roll back, smells the rancid chemical rasp his nostrils, while the Divinity Student turns inside-out drinking. Then, suddenly calm, he rises, carries the jar back to the table, and sits, and stares, and is quiet. Teo goes back downstairs.

Much clearer this time, the Eclogue’s tributaries settle around him with a sensation of magnetic repulsion and slipping along fields, edges pressing and grating inside, not painful, and slowly going in no direction. Many bodies pinwheeling out from his, maintaining single pivot points of contact, a knee, the neck, his collarbone, he turns around to face what’s coming, like a lightless world roaring there and drawing him in, but he eases around the edge and spirals through an orbit before sliding into clammy vapor to preset occasion, then jackknife straight down into the heart of the cold, and unseeing a million miles away he picks up his pen.

This one, Albert, works in fits and starts, disconnecting periodically from memory, disjoint, platforms at the edge of sight are walls and curtained windows, frequent beds—breakfast time now, but they serve dinner instead, dark outside, so yes it must be dinner time, only I’m sleeping now, bathing, lunch, but which day again? Shadow music and ghost rooms, pretty wife in care maintaining him. Words coming now and then, writing them down, getting ready, just getting ready to go where they come from, windows blur to clouds and lightbulbs to dandelions, pretty wife to pull up the covers, and son watching over him at night, smiling pretty wife pressing cushion coming down again she holds it close, soft pressure hot against his face and feathers clogging his mouth, then, no feeling in his legs, no feeling in his arms, a snowball bursts in his chest, and nothing again, like the Divinity Student’s lightning-caught nothing, but too late, it’s gone, it goes away, a full notebook and he’s missed the most important thing! The medium, falling back in his chair, the medium, running his fingers through his hair, the medium—the Eclogue itself, he wipes his chin, looks at the jar and the wallpaper refracting through yellow fluid and the glue-smell old Albert’s brain. It’s already going clear.

But get the medium, press through and try again to get back to the medium, the presence on the other side of Albert's static life. Incline his face into the clammy mouth of the jar, sour chlorine chemical smells thrusting fingers down his throat and up into his head, shooting down his nose, boiling behind his eyes, atomizing the stuff into his face, drinking more of it and feeling it burn heavy down into him. Now it's diluted but any memory, anything at all, passing through nurseries and locker rooms, dim haze of family outing and hateful weather, tossing on vomit-colored oceans that stank of vomit, swam with it and shrieked it at him, and all the time the Divinity Student is there on the deck, or under the crib, or loitering reflected in the eyes of his friends, pressing in at the borders, pushing at the edges of those memories, pushing out, get out past the frame into the blackness memory floats in, the place the words come from, but grinning faces hand him books weighing him down, pinning him in place, a ring on his finger weights him in place, blankets tie him down, years pile up on him and the Divinity Student is fighting to get out from under, or dig down deep enough and push out in all directions. Everywhere, no break, no stop, Sunday school and cooking, laundry, talk, eat, sleep, breathe, tedium-exhaustion.

Now the Divinity Student is only fighting to get out, just to get out, he punches the friendly faces, he kicks down the bookshelves and throws the plate, the bed, out the window, and cuts the ring from his hand, and leaps off the roof, puts the whole pencil in his mouth and eats the lead like candy smacking his lips, he tears up the calendar, and shreds the clothes, and pulls the house down around him, and now only an instant there it is—that same place he glimpsed in the lightning, and the voice he heard then, for only a hair's breadth moment, and then drop back again in the same damn room and the same damn chair, and he rushes down and out of the shop lest he tear that apart, too.

Describing a wide arc, the Divinity Student weaves back towards the shop. He's watching the sky so intently that he knocks into lampposts and stumbles over paving stones. Slowly it's building, the sense of staring down into limitless openness, until his head reels back and he has to catch himself. The moon's gone new, dimly visible, a black ball drifting just past peaked rooftops and gutters encrusted with carved starlit faces—it's a huge closed eye trained on him.

Teo’s street appears to his left. The shop is ruined.

The Divinity Student sprints snapping broken glass under his feet and bounds through a gaping hole where the door was once. Inside, the refrigerator cases lie uprooted against the far wall, meat and machine entrails strewn across the remaining scarred tiles. He looks down; sees tire tracks smeared on the floor.

Desden pokes his head out of the meat locker with wide eyes. He comes up fast, still in his apron with a holster of knives.

“Two cars came while you were gone.” He makes an aborted gesture at the shop. “ . . . I managed to get rid of the body before . . . ”

“What about Albert and Chan?”

“Safe in their jars. I packed everything up after they left.”

“Did you get a look at them?”

“Windows were tinted.”

“Are you all packed?”

“Not much to pack.”

“Wait here.” The Divinity Student stalks out into the street, stepping over some beams that used to be in the ceiling. His throat’s gone tight like a slow vise clenching down on him. The city has an undersea look to it—he goes down to the pay phone on the corner.

“It’s me, I need a new place, the cars got Teo’s shop.”

Fasvergil says nothing for a long time. Eventually, he disappears behind the receiver, comes back in a few minutes with an address.

“Itemize the damages. I’ll expect a report on this.”

Dial tone.

Food-smell and people-buzz and then the rubble again, Desden standing alone in the shop with a bitter look on his face.

“This is very bad, very bad,” he says.

# fifteen: the house

High weeds around the house bristle like a frightened cat and surge against the fence. As with the rest of the place, its paint flaked away, long ago exposing old, gray, seamed, desiccated wood fresh only for new splinters. The porch is fifteen feet off the ground, with broken wicker screens between the supporting beams, and behind, the foundation settles into the slope of a low mound, brackened with wiry impenetrable desert brush and short oaks. The Divinity Student carries a bag that sloshes and chimes occasionally with a rich tone of ringing glass. He's following the banister up to the porch, which is also banistered. The entire front of the house is railed with banisters like rows of bones stripped bare and fossilized. Teo passes him and holds the door open, biting his lips, and inside, the core of the house—a vast central shaft with tiny rooms radiating out on all three floors, and separate stairways along the walls with direct access to each floor—more banisters, and ribcage shadows along every wall.

The Divinity Student is a little relieved to get out of the sun; he's been feeling it more lately. A sick, disinterested uneasiness in direct sunlight, making him screw his eyes up and walk stiffly along the street, like an old man. With care he selects his staircase and carries Albert and Chan up to the third-floor room where they'll be working together. Teo goes back out to the cart and brings in another knife rack for the kitchen, then sets about installing the last refrigerator unit.

The two spend the evening pacing the porch and kicking dust and dead leaves down into the weeds. Across the street is a somnolent congregation of desultory houses and yawning warehouses. The wind blows warm brown air baked all day in desert earth and grazed by the monitors. Desden absently flicks one of his knives at a spider—he follows the blade with his eyes, then cocks his head, and the Divinity Student looks.

The point had bitten deep into the wood-rusk, the polished steel handle still humming, but the spider is not there. Nor was it ever there. Teo shrugs and retrieves his knife.

Later, Miss Woodwind comes to visit. Teo opens the door for her. In the vacant expanse of the house's heart, she is pushed by invisible currents from one staircase to another, finally caught and pulled upward by a conveyor-belt of banisters. She holds her arms against herself, but her eyes shine like venom, and she is not afraid.

The Divinity Student's room is directly under the roof. He's there, at work in his shirtsleeves building a divining machine out of an umbrella. She walks in and pauses a moment; there's a great suspender "y" sprawling across his back, darker against his fading black shirt with its bleached silver sheen, frayed cuffs, and worn through at the right elbow, which is cool white and hard, like a water-smoothed stone.

She says hello. He's predictable; he's forgetting about the agency, and Miss Woodwind has taken it upon herself to remind him. He looks sheepish and surprised to see her in the house, digs out one of his notebooks. As she sits on his cot to read the new entries (none of them from the Catalog) he goes back to his invention, impatient. The shaft of the umbrella, sawed off close to the support beams, is attached to a variable set of gears and a single lever with a numerical dial. The spokes are cut to diminish in length according to random intervals within a preset range, between three quarters and one half the length of the previous spoke, and each is tipped with a small tin reservoir atop a fountain pen nib and a spigot. The Divinity Student is currently stringing clear plastic fishing line from each spigot down the length of its spoke, and tying them to the central gear.

She finishes reading and leans back. The cot sags almost to the floor in the middle. One blanket, no pillow. Yellow chemical stains on the sheets. She sits up again, watching him work. Presently she comes over with his notes.

"More sleepwalking?"

He nods. Her fragrance envelopes him.

"This will be acceptable for now, but . . . I have a bad feeling." She wrinkles her brow a little. "You're . . . "

She slaps him across the forehead, and startled he jerks back. "You're getting a bit remote," calm voice, "wherever you go, you must always come back to me." After giving him a significant look, she turns her attention to the desk. "What does this do?"

"Nothing. It's a divining machine, but it's not finished."

“How does it work?”

“You set it in a circle of paper, fill the spigots with different pigments, and turn the crank without looking at it. The configuration of the gear engagement is random, some unpredetermined gears act to wind this spring,” and he points to a copper coil in the midst of the cogs, “others rotate the entire apparatus to a starting position, while others open the spigots. Then you flip the starting lever, and the machine begins to rotate as the spring uncoils, clockwise or counterclockwise, starting and stopping, fast or slow, all randomly.”

“And meanwhile the pigment is dripping down onto the paper from these arms.” She points.

He spreads his hands. “When it’s all finished, you take the paper out and examine the pattern.”

She smirks, pouting her lips a little. “How do you read the pattern?”

“You look at it.”

“What a hobby!” she laughs.

Why take this from her? There’s no choice. He opens his mouth, and something flickers across his features, just a flaring on the rims of his spectacles and the briefest instant of momentary sadness, or sympathy. His eyebrows draw together slanting upward, sending curled ripples across his forehead, his eyes widen and seize at the corners, his mouth pulls open downwards, his throat strains against his collar, all for a moment, then his features melt in confusion—Miss Woodwind has him by the shoulders.

“What’s the matter? What are you doing?”

He shakes his head, slumping to the floor half-conscious trying to point.

She turns her head, her eyes probe the attic’s darkness and then turn forcefully back to him.

“You’re being ridiculous. What did you see?”

A light had gone by very fast. He shakes his hand in front of his face. Everything had looked different in here, for a moment. The Divinity Student had seen someone staring at him from the dark.

“I don’t see anything. Would you stand up!” She shakes him hard.

“ . . . I don’t know.”

“Well?”

He saw only part of the face, only eyes and an open inky mouth, no one he knew.

She throws up her hands. “You’re making all of this up, it’s clear you’re not up to getting anything done today.” She heads for the door.

The Divinity Student follows her and pulls her back, muttering, “Making things up I’ll show you who’s making things up,” and, clasping her belt, he drags her out the door and along the top-floor landing. She leans away but does not protest, mumbling distracted to herself, always curious.

The only door on the other side of the landing bears a heavy latch and an eyepiece, set slanting down—someone on the other side of the door could presumably use it to stare down the staircase. Still holding Miss Woodwind about the waist, the Divinity Student throws the latch and pushes the door open, then thrusts her inside.

He tells her to “look!”

The chamber is vast, reaching its two wings to claim almost all of the upper floor. It is infested with crawlways. Just enough floorspace remains to allow the door to swing open into the room, the rest is heaped with overlapping tunnels, coiling about the room on the floor and hanging from the ceiling, sometimes angular, sometimes curved like a hose, punctuated by small doors and landings, portholes, chutes, and in one case a miniature spiral staircase. At their feet is a terminus, with a wooden door and a small white porcelain knob, just large enough for an adult to creep through on all fours.

“No one knows what this is for. It was built into the walls. Now listen!”

They stand listening for a moment.

From deep within the room comes the muffled sound of someone crawling.

Miss Woodwind is silent.

That night, she goes with them to find Niffruch and Dreyfic. The city morgue is a squat octagonal building situated near the Orpheum, with a green copper dome and thick marble walls. It’s windy tonight, sending showers of dead leaves eddying by streetcorners and rattling empty branches, the vault of the sky is swept clean, so clear that the moon, though new, is still dimly visible as a ball of shade floating above the horizon. The street is quiet save for the hissing of the breeze. Silent, they, three now, fan out and submerge in the shadows flanking the morgue, searching for an entrance.

Miss Woodwind signals, she had walked directly to an open door set deep into the eastern wall.

The Divinity Student gives her a nod.“I knew *you’d* find the door.”

Inside, a narrow passage plumbs into the building like a mineshaft, the ceiling merely inches over their heads. Its walls are yellow, the floor padded with dark green carpet sponging up their footsteps. At regular intervals, pallid, anemic lamps link wall and ceiling, but cast almost no light. They walk for a long time, and the corridor slopes gently downward and begins to curve in on itself, until abruptly they turn a corner and stumble out into the main holding area.

Under girders and swinging lightbulbs are rows and rows of vast cabinets, fifty feet high and white as bone, milky gloss of porcelain doors hinged in tile facing and chrome handles. Once in a while something creaks or whines off in the distance, as if the whole place were adrift on the ocean. The Divinity Student rushes forward, and begins looking for the Ns, while Teo and Miss Woodwind search out the Ds. Labels penned in the same meticulous handwriting spell a legion of names, up and down the ladders and through the aisles, stirring long-stagnant air redolent of rubbing alcohol and boiled metal. Then the Divinity Student calls them. His voice is quiet, but his whispers are carried by the vastness of the unstirred space.

They find him before the special cases, drawing a broad drawer open. Niffruch and Dreyfic lie there together, hand in hand, rigid faces upright at attention. Shreds of tenuous white mist flutter about them or plunge feathering to the floor. The Divinity Student draws a deep breath of stale ice-musk through flared nostrils, then he pounces, trying with all his might to tear their clasped hands apart. Frozen solid. They don’t move.

Desden says, “We can’t carry them both—we’ve only got one bag.”

The Divinity Student scowls. He turns and fixes his gaze on Miss Woodwind, stabbing a finger at the spiderweb of catwalks overhead.

“You keep watch.”

She stands off, watching, smiling back at them from time to time, lips moving, voice droning silently.

The Divinity Student turns back to the bodies. For a moment his eyes flick from one seamed marble face to another. Then with speed prompted of pure bile he seizes Dreyfic’s head and wrenches it viciously to one side, snapping his neck. He exhales and throws Desden a look.

“Now cut it off,” his voice is low.

Desden decapitates Dreyfic with three simple strokes, the cold flesh cuts with a sound like tearing cloth. A watery trickle of thin purple blood drips from the neck wound, but the butcher is careful, and spills nothing getting the head into the bag. The Divinity Student is already dragging Niffruch out of the frost, the ice whines and crackles on the dead man’s suit. Teo comes over to help, and when Niffruch stops short, his hand caught in his partner’s grasp, down comes the cleaver to hack off the hand, and Niffruch slides into the bag.

In the passage again, Desden stumbles, the bag clonks against a wall leaving a broad smear of carmine blood reeking like rotting fish. The Divinity Student is against leaving evidence—the pieces in the drawer would go unnoticed for weeks, months probably, but blood on the walls will bring inquiry the next day. With care he nicks his left eye with a sharp fingernail, and squeezes out a small pearl of clear fluid. As Miss Woodwind and the butcher stare, he seals the wound with one hand while flicking the liquid at the stain. Where it hits, the blood goes clear and begins to run, and this spreads until all is innocent water coursing in small droplets toward the floor. In the cool dry air it will sublimate away, no stain, no trace. With a look of warning to Teo, he squeezes by them and heads back to the street.

Divination machines are not the Divinity Student’s only project. He’s devised a new method, more effective than drinking the preservative fluid. By adding a special reagent to the formaldehyde, he can cause the fermented memory-infusion to rise to the surface without requiring agitation. Strain the liquid off the top, that’s the next step, and collect it on a small metal plate, under a glass dome, with hoses attached through a tube at the dome’s apex. Electric current runs through the metal plate, vaporizes the fluid, which condenses on the interior surface of the dome and is channeled up through the tube, which ends in a breathing mask.

Now he’s shut in the room. Miss Woodwind is still in the house, on the next landing down, wondering out loud to herself at the light under his door. It’s late; he’s rigging up two assemblies—he plans to read Niffruch and Dreyfic together. She’s anxious, could have left hours ago, but there’s something irresistible happening. Eavesdropping earlier, she had heard the Divinity Student reporting to someone on the telephone, someone who

didn’t want him to take Niffruch and Dreyfic at the same time. The Divinity Student had agreed not to, then went ahead with his plans anyway. What happens next?

It’s quiet. Teo is downstairs with his mirrors, dissecting Niffruch’s body just a little at a time, occasionally bursting into a frenzy, carving deep, straight incisions, but he’s quiet now. There’s no way Miss Woodwind can guess what’s happening.

It’s still quiet. Coming back, bringing the body into the house, the Divinity Student had frozen, staring at a window for a moment. Another flash had flickered across his face.

It’s even quieter still. She feels smoke in her chest, something frightening like a slow kick in the stomach. Whatever it is, she sneers at it and pads up the stairs and right up to his door.

She can hear something. The door is locked, but she can hear a noise through the door, a windy, scratching sound. For a while she fumbles for what it could be, what’s making that noise? Then he stops to take a breath, and she understands she’s hearing two sounds. A pen scratching paper, and him. Reedy, and whistling, and hollow, and only a veil over a silent nothing so that even she stops her ears with her hands and runs downstairs, she hears him screaming without a voice, whisper-screaming, without stopping.

# sixteen: the final interview

Miss Woodwind talks in her sleep. She wakes in mid-sentence—she's in the house, the Divinity Student is curled asleep at her feet. He's rolled himself up into a ball in his heavy coat at the other end of the bed. She didn't hear him enter the room, didn't remember when she'd fallen asleep. His spectacles are getting bent, pressed up against his face. Light from outside is bursting on the windowsill and glaring at her from burning patches on the floor. She blinks, dazzled, and windows and carpet corners flicker in green and purple under her eyelids. Getting up, she nearly steps on a cloth-wrapped charm that the Divinity Student had made for her, by request—she will hang it in her house, and it will compel everyone who visits to close their eyes and keep them shut until they leave. She picks it up and picks a little at the rough string binding it shut—he's told her that if she unwraps it to see what's inside, it won't work. Impatient, Miss Woodwind plunges through the door and into the central shaft of the house. Here in the gloom the light-doubles turn to blurred black blind spots hovering immediately before her eyes, and she follows the banister railing downstairs, sloughing off curled scales of paint with the edge of her hand. There's the front door. She stands looking at it for a moment, then thinks again of the Divinity Student sleeping upstairs. What is he doing? She decides to stay longer.

She goes to the kitchen, drawing back too late, remembering what lay there cold on Desden's cutting table—but Niffruch's body is gone, the butcher had already disposed of him. The marble top is antiseptically clean, the knives are racked and shining, cuts of meat, expertly prepared, glow red in the display cabinet under shining glass, unmarred by so much as a single fingerprint. Miss Woodwind purses her lips and walks out. There's the front door.

She wanders past and into the living room. The windowpanes are gray with dust, admitting only the shrillest light glancing hysterically across peeling walls. The furnishings look like bundles of twigs, elongated spiny chairs and listing endtables on precarious spindly legs. She sits for a

moment, perfectly still, and stares into space. After a few moments she hears, for the first time, a faint low sound—a yawning rumble from an indeterminate source, either far above or far beneath the house. Its tone is so low as to be more a sensation than a sound. Not constant, but intermittent, she can only just feel it as a current passing through the floorboards. The house emits no other sound, nothing coherent or discrete, no creakings or settlings, only that sourceless roaring. She mutters a little to herself, stands, and weaves back into the rooms, passing through each and not lingering. In this house, it seems to her, the spaces are always the wrong size, either too large or too close, and everywhere the same disrepair and neglect. She feels it closing around her like a shell, and she longs to burst it apart and expand into the opening. Apart from the furniture, spare and fragile and seeming to be parts of the house themselves, there are no artifacts, nothing left behind, except the things they brought with them.

There is the front door again, but she won't leave yet.

With the passing days she stays with them, goes with them at night to cemeteries and churchyards, holds lanterns over straining backs and flashing shovels, keeps watch while they curse and drag bodies heavy with rot to the cart, tries to read undistracted while lights flicker under the door upstairs—she always goes to the landing; she always stares at the door; she never goes in.

The Divinity Student is changing. He speaks less and less. Miss Woodwind can see him being drawn not so much into himself as outwards into something else, as if he were hanging half in and half out of himself. He's getting pale and moist-eyed, he complains of strange pains, he can barely stand in the heat of the day. He has ceased perspiring altogether—to keep cool, he must spray himself with atomizer filled with formaldehyde. Eliot was the next target after Niffruch and Dreyfic, and after Eliot came Penfield, then Mira, then Gomes, then Carrasene. He sleeps in the same room with them all, dimly shining glass vats wired to the distilling chamber. He takes all of them on at once; he can do that now, easily. She watches him go out every day, tilting down the street with his rolling gait, now much slower than when she met him, easily distracted, more particular than before, bringing in fresh barrels of formaldehyde every day, and she knows he's stopped going to see Fasvergil (whom she now knows by name, from

the telephone), that he's been out beyond the city walls, walking alone in the desert with the monitors. He knows which body to collect next without having to consult with Fasvergil or his agents—the divining machines tell him everything. Sometimes, he'll jerk abruptly back, as if he'd been called by name, or turn, with a flickering expression, to the windows of the house, staring at something invisible over her shoulder.

When she sees him next, his great coat is so black and terrible it's almost leaking darkness, it smudges the air around him like a pall of coal smoke. Even Desden, the devoted friend, will stare at him in disbelief sometimes, when his eyes disfocus, and he'll be slapping himself, struggling to finish a sentence. When he does talk, he stifles every other word, and she knows jealously that he's trying not to use *their* words—the dead minds upstairs.

Miss Woodwind wants to see his notebooks, but he refuses to show them to her. She wants to go to her father, but she doesn't. It's what she doesn't understand, it's really nothing that keeps her in the house. She spends her days reading in her room, and feels the current of the house tumbling through the floorboards.

The Divinity Student drifts in twilight under the trees. He can see the oros clearly now, poised and silent, some asleep, others staring at the road and wailing to each other in low whistling voices. Pedestrians mill about aimlessly; they've gotten harder to see clearly—occluded, indistinct figures. Much sharper are the others he had never seen before. Carried along by the sight of them, he can do nothing else but look. Not just familiars and animal souls, the street is a reef, inhabited by insubstantial things skulking under the pavement or flitting effortlessly above the people's heads, coiling between their legs, lashing out at each other from windows. There are shades like torn umbrellas convulsing up through the air, past the rooftops, like jellyfish, long white smears and clouds of tiny multicolored phosphorescent shapes with jagged edges. A flat manylegged object exhaling odorless blue smoke scuttles over his left foot; he's not disgusted, he doesn't flinch. Behind everything he can hear the Eclogue whisper in little puffs that set everything in motion.

The house floats into view like a shipwreck, rocking gently in the air. An inhabited wreck, there are lights on inside, just dimly visible yellow lambence strained and diluted by silvery windows. The Divinity Student

pushes through the long grass beyond the fence, barely touching the ground, then flows to a stop at the bottom of the steps. A thin veil of blue light flutters across a windowpane. The room beyond is empty. The shutters frame a blue face crying out the window, black mouth drawn wide and cheeks pulled back, eyes two shining crescents, wet brow—it slips away. He watches those features fill with shadow and retreat—they submerge. Something's happening, he's seeing them all the time, every day he sees them. Ghosts. Desperation seethes in him, what's happening? Run, but no, he won't run, this feeling's not worthy of me, I've got things to do. He goes up into the house.

When the sun sets, he tests his newest divining machine, an afterimage light-scribbler, inspired by a note he'd taken earlier: "arrange lights at random in a dark room, enter dancing, read the afterimages in your eyelids. Takes practice and long study." He turns out the overhead light, and sits in the dark in front of a wooden box with a single gear on the right side. Turn the gear to the first cue position with the gentle pressure of fingertips, a muffled report, and a series of tiny shutters in the box's face fall back into dark openings of all shapes and sizes, some interconnecting to form irregular grooves and channels, at random. The Divinity Student presses the lever to the second cue position, and tiny multicolored lights wink on inside, either staring out from single holes or poised at the top of a groove or channel; from a slot just below the "lid" of the box, a broad black damping bar clunks into position, hinged to pass at regular intervals down over the face of the box. The Divinity Student pulls the gear a few more notches.

The damping bar rolls down, disappears through a slot at the bottom of the box's face, the lights shunt back and forth, some moving at random, others trace the pattern of the shutters, the damping bar reappears through a slot at the top of the box's face and sweeps down again. Watching, he then shuts his eyes and reads the residual streaks beneath his eyelids, the afterimages, scribbling notes on a pad by his hand. He pulls the lever a few more notches.

Another dull wooden clack, the shutter configuration changes, the lights get a little brighter, they accelerate under the passing of the damping bar, and the Divinity Student shuts his eyes and takes the next reading, one after each pass of the bar. After a few moments, he pulls the lever down again.

Faster, brighter, and some lights change color, shutters reconfigure, behind him, and unseen, his shadow flares against an angle of the ceiling. He takes more notes and pulls the lever down.

Grains of light billow behind him in the dark like wind-stirred snow, but the Divinity Student keeps going, staring at the box until his eyes hurt then grinding them shut. He's trying to write what he sees, writing so fast his pencil tears the page. He jerks the gear and the box flares like a match drawing streaks along his face and on the walls, drawing flecks of light into patterns swimming through the room. Adjust the gear, and the box spins faster making a rattling sound, and turn the gear and the room goes brighter, long figures resolving in the room, behind his blazing face, arms hanging useless at their sides, drawn faces like cracked shells of blue light with gaping eyes and mouths listlessly watching him at work.

No time for notes, he's gradually speeding the box by increments until it buzzes and rattles and shakes on the table. Wide green eyes, fixed and colorless, trying to swallow the patterns whole, while all around him figures mill and weave, taking any shape and color, while cracked blue faces slacken and nod like faces at asylum windows, fixing empty vision on the back of his head, the careening rasping patterns spinning around his face. Breathing hard he grips the gear as tight as he can, turning it bit by bit under white knuckles, peering frantically down, trying to see his way through, the damping bar fans his face so fast it's little more than a gray blur between him and the lights. Then suddenly the Divinity Student shuts the machine off and screws his eyes shut, falling backwards, even as he hears the engine's wheezing halt, into a black ocean of stars and streaking bolts of lightning. On the street below, Fasvergil turns his face, saturnine in moribund light, toward the house. He folds his hands. Overhead, stars retreat and the constellations yawn apart, the wind rattles the grass at his feet, and, behind him, empty buildings gape and dribble streams of dead leaves from their gutters. Drawing closer, the house tips precariously, balancing to fall on him, but Fasvergil's concern outweighs his doubts. All in black with his frayed belt and soft cat-burglar slippers, he pads up the stairs on thin crepe soles and raps his long dry knuckles on the door.

A woman answers; surprising. Miss Woodwind scrutinizes him carefully, bringing her face right up to his and staring directly at him, as if

memorizing his features. He can tell that she wants him to go away. Her expression is disdainful.

“I am Father Fasvergil. I’m here to speak with the Divinity Student. We have some words for each other.” His face creases softly and mildly, with real priestly reserve.

Miss Woodwind becomes more annoyed. It’s dark inside; he can barely see her, but it seems her mouth is moving silently. Talking to herself. After pausing to think, she turns and walks stiffly into the house, leaving him to shut the door behind him. In a patch of light falling dead from the neighboring room she turns and indicates one of the stairways with an offhand gesture. He sees her better in the light. She looks tired and pale, and she is talking silently to herself.

“He’s on the top floor.” A quiet, rich voice, though sighing with fatigue, perhaps she’s ill. He thanks her sepulchrally and slips past, mounting the stairs.

Miss Woodwind watches him vanish into banister shadows, squinting a little. Behind him he leaves a smell of mothballs and library dust familiar to her.

Fasvergil knocks and waits, and knocks again. He has a long wait. Finally, the door falls silently open before him, and he steps in quietly to confront the Divinity Student.

“You haven’t been reporting to me. You’ve been missed.”

He scans the many silver-shining jars watching from shelves, tables, and mantles. “Nevertheless you clearly continue with the project.”

The Divinity Student stands mute, disheveled, his face has gone soft and pale as wax, his flesh is turning translucent, he stands in the middle of the room as if he were hung there, twisting slightly on his feet.

“I can only conclude that you have decided to pursue this entirely on your own, and that you are keeping your discoveries to yourself.”

The Divinity Student crosses to the desk with a single step, surprisingly strong and decisive for all his weak looks. He seizes a handful of paper and hurls it in Fasvergil’s face.

“Now leave,” he says.

“This house belongs to the Seminary. If you withhold information from us we will be compelled to evict you.”

“Leave,” the Divinity Student says.

Fasvergil opens his mouth to speak again, but the Divinity Student is already by his side, seizing him, his breath clouding in Fasvergil's dry face.

A single dry gasp of formaldehyde unfurls from between the Divinity Student's lips, and in it boil a hundred gaping blue faces, and infinitely silent watching things, and many other ones stirring along the ragged edges of the Divinity Student's breath, and more—a deep empty nothing, spreading behind the walls and surging through the floorboards and shimmering inside him. Fasvergil is stunned. The Divinity Student has a stronger claim on the house than he does.

That dead hand falls from the back of his neck, the Divinity Student retreats into the shadows. Faltering, Fasvergil is consumed with a new feeling. He struggles to address the Divinity Student, but his words crowd and trample each other, muddling in his mind until all intending is consumed.

Then the Divinity Student's face turns back upon him, fixing him with a gaze as steady and impersonal as a star—he sees the Divinity Student's face silhouetted against itself—and staggers back as if struck, not recognizing anything human in that face. Fasvergil finally backs out onto the landing, looking at the Divinity Student in a convulsion. The Divinity Student stares at him from the far end of the room. The door slams shut between them.

# seventeen: the muse

Cramped in his room, the Divinity Student shakes awake in the middle of the night. He rolls over and takes his head in his hands, but now even sleep is strange—falling and waking with blunt headaches, half-dreaming all the time in weird fragments, dragged away and thrown in the river, or held down and screamed at, wordless, voiceless howling. Tearing the sleep from his head in shreds, he turns to look out across the expanse of floor toward the wall and its windows. Suddenly, he comes sharply awake, alert, the air seems to vanish, and his gaze accosts the furniture, objects, flowing their outlines into each other in the dark. Caught, they snap back within their borders and their borders go rigid.

He's on his feet. Things scuttle in the corners; they whisper to each other, and the Divinity Student is beginning to understand them. One window in particular is asking for him, shining bright blue in a black wall. Padding across the floor, he can hear tiny scrabbling footsteps dodging out of his way, rustling like grass at his feet. He stops, resting his hands on the sill, and looks out.

There she is! It's a woman, standing far off on a roof top, looking in his direction. She alights on a chimney and vaults impossibly high, landing on a neighboring gable as lightly as a falling leaf. Dancing bright bounds and leaps, she hurtles from one house to another, always coming closer and moving faster and making no sound. Even at a distance the Divinity Student sees her clearly: compact, a white pinafore with skirts like sea foam and black bands around her waist and throat, each hand gloved in black, fluttering in a lace cuff like a spider in a white blossom. Her long legs are also pitch black and likewise her hair, wrenched back in a tight knot on top of her head. She's still far away, then suddenly she cartwheels along one roof's spine and hurls herself out into the air like a thunderbolt, flashing through the air. He hears her touch down over his head, her two feet landing as light as birds. Footsteps tap up and down over his head—she seems to be dancing.

The Divinity Student throws open the sash and thrusts his head out the window, craning his head in time to see a flash of petticoat. Then suddenly her face appears between his and the sky, peering down. She smiles, and her smile strikes him with a tangible shock, like a hammer blow. Her teeth are jagged as a mouthful of venomous broken glass, her eyes, black and glistening like deep wells, narrow to two happy crescents. The Divinity Student steps back from the window, and in a flash she flips down, hanging from the eaves, slipping lithely into the room. Now she is immediately in front of him, silhouetted against the window. She puts her hands on her hips and looks at him, and her teeth flare in an awful grin when she notices jars on shelves and tables. She takes a step forward, one of her gleaming shoes crackles a spare page lying on the floor; she squats and looks it over—it's one of his notebook pages—her eyes snap back up to him again, and they shine this time deeper than water, pinning him on the spot.

The page drops straight to the floor like a stone. She walks up, making ghastly delightful faces, and stands right in front of him, breathing cool air on him; she's rustling and cool with flesh like tissues of liquid air, pulls a serious face and raps on his head with her knuckles. He jerks away but does not retreat. She raps again, gravely. Then he reaches for her, and she reaches for him, and what happens next—words fail, words fail . . .

Now he's always dreaming, and so sensitive to the slightest excess of sensation that daytime is too much for him. He remains inside all day, quailing with a sense of brittle fragility that threatens to erupt in splitting pain, and when night brings him relief, he wanders the streets, passing cemeteries filled with ghosts standing in their graves, quietly chorusing "Oh see us," after him, eyes closed, hands pat the air. His eyes close and his hands pat the air just the same. He then leaves San Veneficio altogether to walk outside in the desert. The monitors ignore him, lying motionless in rows, a petrified forest of black shapes against the horizon, eyes staring reflected light back at the city. He still sees strange things, but away from the streetlamps he can't make them out clearly—they're much larger and slower out in the desert, sometimes whispering past him just a few inches away, whale-sized or larger, and glacially silent, and the Eclogue takes on the mute immediate face of an animal. He'll look up at the stars, or a

gibbous moon, and a vast shadow will swim by overhead, diving between the clouds, occasionally sinking low to drift along the ground.

As he wanders there, sometimes he turns and looks at the city, and his eyes water and smart. Glowing, San Veneficio blurs into a jagged coppery smear along the horizon, shimmering at its base, its penumbra of lights dotted with spiraling shapes circling over the Orpheum, the plazas and spires, his house. Lustrous people-shaped things sail around the walls like uprooted anemones. Gazing at the city repels him, disorienting, making him giddy, and he turns away before too long.

Returning one night, sleep steals over him with such force that he drops to the ground directly, like a scarecrow.

Sunlight lances red-gray through his eyelids, the shadows of people fall across his face. He covers his face with his palms against the light, until, after blinking a few minutes into his hands, he becomes accustomed. The Divinity Student looks up, squinting. He's lying at the end of Box Street, just inside the border where pavement gives way to bare dirt and trees. It takes a long time for him to make out the dim figure hovering against a wall nearby.

The Divinity Student drags himself up into a crouch and starts to move toward the other man—then stops. There's a line drawn in the dirt in front of him. It curves around . . . it's a circle. Someone had drawn a circle around him while he was sleeping. The Divinity Student surges forward and then staggers back. He pushes out to the sides and all around, but no good, he can't move past the perimeter. Every time he nears the edge a greasy nausea rolls over in his stomach, and the physical burden of the sun's light becomes a sort of sucking pressure snapping at his legs, making him tumble to his knees again.

The one against the wall is coming toward him. Now the Divinity Student can see him, the curious expression on Ollimer's face, that he had not genuinely believed it would work, still doesn't believe it.

"Now listen you," he says quiet and timid, "just stay where you are."

"Break this line and get me out of here." The Divinity Student's voice is harsh and disembodied, and for a moment Ollimer almost looks ready to obey. He straightens instead.

"I'll let you out, provided you give me reason."

“I don’t have my notebook and you wouldn’t get it anyway now break this line!” He points to the ground.

“You have to turn over the house! . . . You made a commitment and now you have to give us the words!” It’s beginning to dawn on him that the Divinity Student really can’t get out of the circle. “You’ll hand them over or stay right where you are!”

Time passes. Ollimer stands with strengthening resolve at the end of the empty street, the Divinity Student, squatting in the dust, glowers malevolently back up at him.

Suddenly he’s knocking back and forth inside the circle like a caged animal throwing dust in the air, howling and barking curses, and Ollimer jumps backwards startled. The Divinity Student freezes and stares intently at Ollimer, and for Ollimer it’s as if two black gulfs yawn in that face. This time the Divinity Student speaks quietly. “Break the line.”

Ollimer is trying to twist himself free, screwing his eyes shut against the two icy fingers that press out of the Divinity Student’s face onto his own.

“Come here.”

“You owe us those words!”

“Come here and I’ll give them to you.”

Ollimer takes a step. “You don’t have your notebook.”

“I was bluffing, I have it right here.” He shows the book, holding it between his long fingertips. “Let me give it to you.”

Ollimer is coming toward him now. “And the house? What about that—”

Ollimer has permitted his hand to stray over the circle’s border. He’s staring at the way his shadow falls across the circumference he drew on the ground, his head cocked to one side, gazing with the look of a daydreaming schoolboy at his hand’s shadow, realizing too late, in slow motion—and then the Divinity Student seizes Ollimer’s outstretched hand and drags him forward nearly tearing his arm from his socket. Ollimer’s feet gouge two long grooves over the circle’s outline, breaking it.

The Divinity Student explodes, hurling Ollimer down the street, sending him flying down the block, touching the ground roughly on his side and then Ollimer skips and spins along the pavement like a stone skimming the surface of a lake, slapping the ground with his palms trying to steady himself, finally he manages to get to his feet and runs in panic down a side alley. Behind him the Divinity Student is angrily scuffing the circle out with

his feet, and when he’s done, Ollimer is just disappearing ratlike around a corner.

“Ollimer I’ll murder you! I’ll cut you out of your head and give your body to the butcher!”

His black coat bursts open in a cloud of dust, and springlike the Divinity Student sprints after Ollimer, his long legs reaching out and snapping back so far he nearly grazes his back with his heels. Almost out of control he ricochets down the alley, he windmills his arms seizing garbage cans and debris and tossing them out of his way, and he’s granted a glimpse of Ollimer at the other end of the alley, pale panicking face under flight-disheveled red hair. The Divinity Student bellows horribly at the retreating back. Redoubling his efforts he leaps over crates and heaps of trash, rappelling off of windowsills and fire escapes to keep himself in the air. He rounds the next corner, and Ollimer is vanishing down another alley, showing his heels like a scared rabbit.

Ollimer leads him toward the town center. Presently the routes widen, more people appear, until they’re both of them fighting their way through crowds, Ollimer weaving with agility enhanced by fear, and the Divinity Student stiff-arming pedestrians and cars out of his way. They’re murky shadows to him, scarcely recognizable. All he sees is a flash of red bobbing like an apple a few blocks ahead. But as time goes on his rage abates—he gets confused and worn out. The burden of the light and the enervating presence of other people seeps into his joints and saps his strength and determination by degrees, until he has to forget about Ollimer. He’s started dreaming again, getting a soft head, half-blinded by the obscure shapes milling around, their murmuring voices humming up and down in his mind. Something like a jackal is peering at him from a window. It throws its head back and its mouth tears wide, yellow shoots and leaves sprouting from its throat, so the jackal seizes the vine and pulls it, coaxing it to grow with its hands. The Divinity Student watches the blind drop between them, and a sodden depression closes on him. Further down the block, a long black car belching exhaust pulls up and disgorges a large black dog, disappears into a building. The engine stands idling, fumes catching in the Divinity Student’s throat, nauseating. Later, the dog comes back out again, back into the car, the door slams and the car speeds off, odd smell emanating. Feeble and lost,

he wanders with arms outstretched in front of him like a blind man, trying to find his way back to the house.

He blunders up the Street of Wrought-Iron Workers, deserted now—it's midday, and too hot to work with fire. He passes them drinking their tea on the corner. The street curves as it goes up, and soon they're out of sight; he's invisible, soaking with sweat, he stops, pulls the atomizer from his pocket, and sprays formaldehyde on his face. The Divinity Student stares around at the twisted black iron gates and rods in the shop courtyards, and it seems to him as if he's wandering among strange oversized letters glistening in gullies and nooks to either side, limned in flickering inky fire. The impression of walking through a printed page becomes overwhelming, disarming, and he sprays himself again, taking comfort in the familiar bitter smell and searing vapor.

A shadow falls over him from above, and in a moment he finds that he his vision is suddenly less foggy, and that the heat has abated a little. He looks up but the brilliance of the sky blinds him to the descending shade—someone's coming down out of the sky. The shade is presently standing beside him. And now black gloved hands, like spiders in lace cuffs, take hold of his arm, clamping down vice-tight through his heavy coat, and guide him up the street. And out towards the edges of town. And up the steps to the house.

Once under the eaves his vision finally begins to clear. The house exhales cool air on him, and he basks in it. His head, plagued by slabs of day-heat out in the sun, turns glassy clear, and the swaying dizziness of the street is arrested as decisively as the motion of a pendulum is stopped by the clockmaker's hand. A shade ascends out of sight behind him even as he turns to it, vanishing with a rustle of petticoats.

# eighteen: gaster

The Divinity Student falls out of his cot, lies on the floor, jarred but only just barely awake. He has dreamt the dream he'd dreamt before, in the hammock, but this time he changed more completely, into something impossible to remember, and it was the woman who had come through the window who was waiting for him in the clouds. The ugly, ginger ache behind his eyes wakes up, too, and he holds his head in his hands, yawning until his jaw hurts. He's graduated to a new level of pain; his muscles feel like they're being rubbed with sour stinging fingers and his joints shriek against each other like glass on glass.

Still exhausted, he pitches himself forward and drags himself to the chair. Tonight they're going after Gaster—the last of the twelve word-finders. Tonight the Catalog will be complete. Gaster is kept on permanent display in a public building, but the place empties out after hours and they can take him then. The biggest obstacle is a tight noose of guards present twenty-four hours on the premises, but Teo has remedied that now, with the help of a forger he knows in the Street of Clockworks. For a small sum and commission he has happily faked three passes for them as "security inspectors." The Divinity Student lays his head on the desk, feeling blunted and feeble, wanting only to rest and rest. Over and over he relives the dream, seeing clouds parting in front of him and half-remembering being drowned by a feeling he couldn't describe. Relapsing the sky is black before him, a gaping absence—but all the same it's reaching out and spanning the distance to snare him, and all the time he's reaching out his hands to meet it. He comes back to himself, and realizes that Gaster is the key, Gaster and then rest. Gaster, and then the mission is over.

There's a lighted candle over there on the windowsill. The blade of flame is tiny and dwindling, poised at the tip of the wick between empty air and a lake of liquid wax steadily rising, strangling the fire. The Divinity Student stares at the candle with a sense of recognition, falling against himself back into reverie. He stares at it from under his eyelids, until everything around

the light dims and wavers, and although he's smothered and weighed down with exhaustion, he's thinking clearly, he knows the candle is burning away its own substance, sublimating itself invisibly into the air. It's eating itself. Swaying slightly back and forth he realizes that it's hollowing itself out, and going faster and faster, that it will either drown in its melting flesh, or shrink starving away to nothing. Then—snap—and he's out of it again. He catches himself with his mouth open, blowing just gently toward the candle, but it's all the way on the other side of the room, and his breath isn't enough. The Divinity Student sneers at himself. He gets up, walks over, and pinches the candle out with his fingers. Outside it's getting dark—he pulls on his heavy coat and heads downstairs.

It's when he's doing something important that the pain changes. He still feels like a walking scrapyard, but the leaden, crushing vise at his temples relents a little. It doesn't vanish, rather it changes character, and focuses into a sweet toothache pain, and all his senses light up like a window display. He feels as unreplenished and unrefreshed as before, but at these times his machine parts take over and carry him along where he directs, like servants tending a bedridden invalid.

Miss Woodwind emerges from the kitchen and meets him there in front of the door, puts a black doctor bag in his hand. She says something to herself and fetches Teo, who's in the basement grinding his knives. Outside the air is dry and cooling, night's veil drawing across the sky again, San Veneficio lighting up in front of them, orange streetlights and wan porches, rolling in rows up and down and at all angles, making the town look like a tangle of frozen rail cars knotted together in big strands crisscrossing the desert. It's exhilarating. All together, they go quietly, avoiding main thoroughfares where they can and sticking to the slums, smell of stale frying fat and old cabbage. Now and then, drawn wasted faces peer out at them, but something in the air the Divinity Student carries with him keeps them at a distance. The three of them are charged. Teo carries a knife ostentatiously in his belt, but people scrabble aside from a mere look from the Divinity Student. His face is scoured with death.

Miss Woodwind guides the Divinity Student across the big boulevards—otherwise he'd get disoriented, forget where he's going and what he's trying to do, walk through a wall, make mistakes. She doesn't look at his face:

she’d made that mistake before and seen his eyes darting this way and that, peering at nothing, and, following his gaze, she’d almost seen . . .

Presently the crowds thin out, the exodus from the business end of town is over for the night, the people are already lost elsewhere. The Seleucid building is at the northernmost corner of a small, star-shaped square, a big blocky thrust with circular portholes lined in brass, and now that the people have gone, each is a blank, placid well of suggested space inside. The lobby is a glass-fronted box, with a couple of guards pacing around between the ashtrays and potted palms. Miss Woodwind leads them to a nearby alley where Teo has stowed the handcart earlier, and they retrieve the rope from it. They cross the empty plaza to the lobby and stand mute in front of the glass doors.

A dough-faced guard walks up, the Divinity Student holds up his forged pass. The others follow suit. The guard’s eyebrows rumple and his mouth stretches a bit at the corners in an unconscious ingratiating grin—he doesn’t know whether to ignore them or curry their favor. The doors sigh open, with a gust of antiseptic, air-conditioned air. The other guard approaches.

“I wasn’t told about any inspections.”

The Divinity Student glowers at him, and the guard backs away. For a moment he wavers, then nods and lets them pass. They head straight for an open freight elevator and instinctively the Divinity Student presses the button marked “five.” The door slides shut on the guards’ flummoxed faces.

Fifth floor. Miss Woodwind is the first in the corridor, jumping ahead of the Divinity Student. The hall is dark and empty, a double set of swing doors set directly into a far corner.

Now they’re in a big room with long transparent white drapes hanging like ghosts at the windows. Arranged along the walls are the skeletons of monsters glossed with lacquer to prevent evaporation, encrusted with precious metals and gems. The younger, or naturally smaller, varieties leer from dim alcoves and display tables. In the center of the room, still slowly rotating on a pedestal rigged with ribcages of struts and gear-clavicles, is Gaster. Among other things, and beyond his duties as a word-finder, he’s also responsible for the collection of old bones that stands watch over him now. During the day he meets his admirers, revolving in a pressurized case filled with invisible preservative gases. The visitors mill around, read the little plaque, and peer morbidly at his slack face and blanched hair.

The Divinity Student strides directly up to Gaster, and, as if pushing air before him in a solid sharp mass, a crack whips across the front of the case, and with every step he takes, the fissure widens and spreads. There's a hissing sound; Miss Woodwind and Teo cover their faces, for their noses and eyes are already smarting and burning with the hot, buzzing, non-smell of that gas. Even Gaster himself looks singed. The Divinity Student reaches out his hand and taps the case once, and the front panel collapses like wet paper. Teo and Miss Woodwind stagger back to the door, then drop through. Taking a deep breath through flared nostrils, with relish, the Divinity Student steps into the case and draws Gaster tenderly to him, carrying him out of the room like a baby, head cradled on his shoulder.

Then, in the hallway—footsteps are coming, a few flashlight beams scratch across walls and framed pictures, guards coming from around the corner. Teo grabs the Divinity Student, who stands gazing lost in Gaster's face, and pulls him along, following the bend in the hall, and Miss Woodwind starts trying doors. Finally, she kicks one open and they all pile into a small office with a window facing the street. She slams the door behind them and barricades it with a desk. Voices call from the elevator.

Working fast, Teo pulls the rope out from under his apron and ties it to the radiator, tossing the other end down to the street. He looks to the Divinity Student, but he in turn grabs Miss Woodwind by the arm and sends her through first, then Teo after. Flashlight beams itch by under the door, knocks and bangs up and down the hall, the lock rattles and starts to give. The rope breaks. Down below, Miss Woodwind is already on the ground, and Teo drops only half a story; he's safe, coils of rope spiraling down on top of him. The Divinity Student gently presses Gaster's face into the folds of his overcoat and bounds out of the window.

He lands square on his feet from five stories, stamped on the pavement a sound like a gunshot. For a moment he's perfectly still, then, exhaling, he straightens his legs. He walks, limping only a little, and tenderly places Gaster in the handcart. Teo, moving very slowly, goes to help him push the cart up the alley. Miss Woodwind follows too, also very slowly. Above, lights flare in the empty office, heads pop out the window and stare, stabbing their lights down the side of the building, up and down the radiating streets. There is no sign of the Divinity Student. They are getting away.

Over the past few weeks, Teo has become more and more thorough, his technique now demonstrating a decidedly greater degree of precision and skill. Now he's dissecting Gaster slowly, piece by piece, flaying him first with exquisite care, and always watching himself in the mirror, imagining himself on the table. Periodically, he sprays Gaster with a bottle of formaldehyde to keep him fresh; now he too finds the smell refreshing. If he takes his time and breathes the mist in deeply, he can feel the more acute sensations inflicted on the body—sharp decadent pain welling up like foul water in his limbs, pocketing itself inside him, making him wince and recoil from the body and then step up and carve into him again, like someone endlessly inspecting a painful wound, or someone whipping himself. Desden still curses to himself, but he's taken to cursing quietly, muttering all the time under his breath, almost as an afterthought. It's the cutting that seizes his interest, and he knows this time will be the last, at least for now. As he walks around the table to start on Gaster's left side, passing the empty skull, he thinks of the Divinity Student at work upstairs, and wonders what will happen.

Earlier that day, Miss Woodwind found a fragment, transcribed in the Divinity Student's handwriting, in the attic room:

"I was sent to suffer and learn and to join the Eclogue. From dictation: you split off and are the ghost sent to encounter my soul as a stranger, bring with you the offering of the first, lost image of us together. When you are caught dreaming, look in a mirror to wake yourself. I correspond to San Veneficio in this way—its soul is brought to me by the saints who are my eyes and ears."

She drops the page in disgust. "Crazy rubbish!"

The Divinity Student is beginning. Hoses curve in the air around him, one from each of the twelve jars, drawing formaldehyde through an air pump onto an aluminum plate on the table. Each hose adds a different color of fermented memory: gray-green, yellow, brown-orange, tea colored, and clear—they collect in layers without mixing. When the plate is filled, the Divinity Student turns the pump down to a trickle, empties his lungs, and fits a mask, connected to a porcelain dome suspended just above the plate, over his mouth and nose. At the same instant, he drops a catch and sends

current running through the plate. The formaldehyde hisses and vaporizes, boiling up into his face, and with a single breath he draws it all into his lungs. His head snaps back against the chair and his arms fall stiff over the armrests. On the table, a thin trickle of chemicals dribbles from each hose onto the plate, skipping in beads over the electrified surface and melting into steam, breath drawn into the Divinity Student.

He loses all sense of his body immediately, his limbs go warm-numb and seem to fall away, and then his senses fall away, too.

The first thing is a clear cycling chime like a ringing glass that passes through at intervals. He's got nothing else but that and a feeling of something like a lightless explosion—solid and frozen . . . not warming but still melting into wind or waves. He's going very far. Although he can't see, there are shapes around him, darker shadows looming against the dark like cliffs and frothings like sea foam. There are things that seem like panels of transparence, windows, lightless as everything else but looking as if he's peering through something, from one dark to another. At first he thinks they're moving past him, but no . . . their positions are fixed, he's the one who's moving. Gradually, a low thrumming sound becomes audible, from no particular source, as if all the surrounding landscape rests on a blurring membrane. He continues to move "forward," and then he starts smelling a warm, sweet, acrid smell, like wood alcohol, but it's a secondhand sensation, from far off or somebody else. Now he can feel ropes whipping around him, or maybe flying stones, but it seems more like taut ropes spanning vast invisible distances, whipping through the air with a low whistling sound, dropping tiny currents of air or water, small disturbances in the air.

Albert is the first to arrive. He just appears, although he's not actually visible—it feels like light hitting blind eyes, a physical touch. If he's anywhere he's just above the Divinity Student and to the left. One by one they appear—after Albert come Niffruch and Dreyfic together, and then Chan after that, and the spectrum fills out piece by piece. Gaster comes last, and he's right beside the Divinity Student, so close he can feel the Eclogue's "waves" or "wind" berthing around him.

As they speak together he begins to forget their names, recognizing them only by their manner of speaking. The first one has a shrill, wan voice, and shrieks; two together make rustling, whispering sounds; one is almost

wholly silent; here coughs and barks; and there the patter of fingers flicking together; this one hums, stuttering “mm” or “mm mmmuh”; from that one —a bubbling hiss and sneeze; a bestial lowing and shouting on one side; on the other a flat uninflected voice muttering on a single fixed tone; laughing or sobbing; and the last speaks by dancing in an awkward, heavy circle, invisible yet sensible. Together they’re all speaking the Catalog-language, the Eclogue-language, about everything, and behind everything.

The strain is terrible; the longer he stays the more tenuous and lost in the stream he becomes. Vaporous hot flashes shoot from underneath to curdle up and around brittle sensations of obscene toothache pain and he’s being whittled away, flying off in pieces that flutter away in high-pitched sounds like flocks of frightened birds. Pushing in farther it’s only more obscure and much deeper than he’s ever been, drawn into wide expanses filling with cold fibrous structures unraveling outward with no horizon visible only as greater shadows against dark fields, veils or endless surfaces both fluid and brittle, less moving than expanding—he’s the only limited thing—him and the twelve with him, but they’ve been gone a long time, they’re less limited. Only ghost sensations now, like tingling in phantom limbs, clinging together but strained to a point of tearing fragmenting and flaking away in flecks that reflect the dark—he’s still trying to remember enough, the twelve word-finders drop away completely—he’s looking for the medium past them, and what words they *really* use. The pieces twist around him in orbit, brittle weak feelings crumpling and collapsing pours over smooth planes searing hot along the edges and collecting in boiling beads, wash back into the Divinity Student wracked in his chair on waves from an empty-foaming ocean.

# nineteen: the last day

The Divinity Student knows this day will be his last. The divining machines verify it. It. The twelve jars that stare at him from all corners of the room tell him, the daylight that ebbs and flows in slow tides of color tells him, and the lightless patches in corners and along the edges of his room—they in particular tell him. He's found the Catalog. His studies are completed. He sits at the desk, rocking back and forth just a little, feeling only empty waiting, the Eclogue yawning for his offering. The house around him is expanding to let it in. The air around his shoulders draws in frozen, painful needles in his fingers and down his legs, deep tooth-rattling shudders. With an absent feeling, he practically throws himself from the chair and out the door.

Miss Woodwind is reading in her room when the Divinity Student comes in. He sits down beside her, says nothing. She finishes the paragraph and puts the book in her lap.

"Well?"

He's staring at the floor. Again she becomes conscious of the house's low thrumming, fluttering hard under the floorboards—has it gotten louder?

"What is it?" she asks, but he only starts wavering gently backwards and forwards. Miss Woodwind gets up and grabs the arms of his chair.

"What are you doing now?" she says it loud, trying to get through, "come on, answer me! I've been here all this time waiting for you, at least you could tell me what's happening!"

Either he's dreaming again, or ignoring her, or he can't understand her anymore, because he still says nothing. She throws up her hands, they land on her hips as she goes to the window.

"What am I doing here?"

Outside, she can see a car idling at the corner. It's windows are dark; it's impossible to see inside. Eventually, as if responding to her angry gaze, it drives off down the road in a bleary cloud of scattered paper. She thinks of her father slipping pages into developing pans and the heavy magnifiers

he'd use to study them; she thinks of the office and misses it. Finally her thoughts spin out beyond her attention and she finds herself peering at an empty street. When she turns around, the Divinity Student hasn't moved.

"You don't even realize I'm here," she says quietly.

She looks at him across the room, crumpled in the chair like a scarecrow.

"I know you're here." His voice is repulsive, it nearly pushes her back against the windowsill. But she screws up her determination and approaches his chair, his splayed feet in heavy shoes discarded on the floor.

"So tell me what you're doing! If you're not collecting words anymore then why do you stay here? . . . You're looking for something else!"

She brings her face down until it's only inches from his. For a moment he weaves, barely able to find her eyes.

" . . . Yes, you're right."

"Then let me in on it! Tell me what it is! I just have to know what it is!"

This is wearing him out. "I would tell you if I could."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

He's waving at her, trying to fend her off, "I can't tell you anything more . . . it's not for telling."

"Are you a liar or just an idiot?!" she's keeping after him, thin lipped and bright-eyed, "I want a sensible answer!"

But he's already fading, his eyes are glazing and his mouth goes slack, his head falls back against the chair.

Miss Woodwind's eyes bore into him a moment, and then she goes downstairs.

There's the front door.

After a moment, she bites her lip, looks up the shaft framed with stair flights; her heart's in her mouth, something awful pouring up into her, toward him. One last thought of him as he had looked, standing talking to her father for the first time a few weeks ago, and then she remembers him at the fountain in the park. Then she walks out the door.

Cars have been passing up and down the street all day trying to distract him, or trying maybe to shave off pieces of his thoughts as they go by, fragmenting his concentration. Sometimes they'll idle directly in front of the house, and the Divinity Student will stand perfectly still, feeling the house shake to their engine hum, smelling the exhaust, the lingering outside

pressing like a weight on his chest. Then, for no discernible reason, they'll pull away. Then the pressure lifts like a fading headache. He's come to suspect the insects, too. There aren't many Teo doesn't manage to kill, not just with knives, but with all manner of poisons and toxins tracing the edges of the house, baiting every door, window, crack. Those who do get through must have a reason, a powerful drive to get into the house, and seek out the Divinity Student. There's no telling when a pair of tiny eyes may be watching, and the Divinity Student is constantly on the alert. He can't let anything go wrong—just a little longer, until it comes. Once or twice a mosquito bit him, only to be killed and embalmed instantly with its first sip of his formaldehyde blood, and the Divinity Student suddenly felt the tug of its tiny mind as it perished, living its death along with it, connected together along a thread of formaldehyde. He smiles when that happens.

Teo is leaving. He's disposed of Gaster's body, and he's packing his things. Teo can see the time ahead unspooling like a short ribbon striped with days and nights, and at the end the Divinity Student's failing body will lie pale and curved on the ground with shadows over his face. However much longer it will last, he knows that the Divinity Student has no use for him anymore. So he puts his things away, and sends for a cart to carry off the last remnants of his shop. There are relations of his in town who will put him up until he can open a new shop, and pace in front of his mirrors again.

The last time Teo sees the Divinity Student, he's standing on one of the landings on the middle floor, leaning on a precariously tilting banister and staring out into space. The butcher waves his hand a little, and says he's going. The Divinity Student barely notices, inclining his head down only slightly, swaying, one suspender strap falls from his shoulders. He manages to unwrap a few waving fingers from the railing and makes a painful effort to grin, but his grin looks like death. Teo turns to go, and all feeling washes out of him, and he's all but forgotten his friend by the time he's out the door.

Completely alone in the house, staggering from room to room without point until he can barely lift his feet, then sitting with an empty head, staring at the wallpaper for a while, and getting up again. The place is empty. Wake up and there are cars going by outside, there's a fly watching him from a windowpane. He crushes it with his notebook and cracks the glass. Despite

the effort he rambles up and down the stairs over and over again, increasingly coming to rest up in his room, staring at the glasses gathering dust all around, and his rickety, derelict divining machines. Time runs out. Fasvergil and Ollimer fade away. He has the Catalog, he has translated it and now it is translating him. The Catalog was not intended for them. He has destroyed his notes.

Sitting, and with evening falling, the Divinity Student feels himself settling in his chair, dropping further and further, and he has no strength to resist. As the day fades, his eyes refuse to become accustomed to the dark, everything blends behind a screen of tiny, shimmering motes of increasingly diffused light. Months pass without the lifting of that curtain, the window beyond remains as black as if it were painted black. Over time, cobwebs gather across the panes; dust blankets him, the room, the whole world; and he sits without stirring a single finger, his breathing the only sound and movement, growing shallower all the time. In imperceptible increments the house begins to fade, each fiber of the wood, the glass, the plaster, all of them starting to blend into the air with a faint dying glow. Older, much older vistas are coming through now. Luminous forms swim in and out among the furniture fanning the air with spectral plumage, others sulk in shadow corners coiled ready to spring, still others hover basking in dull, motionless inertia. For the first time their voices are audible to him, the inarticulate noises and weirdly voiced half-words recited almost like verse in the air, which has become thick with things previously unseen. Cold drafts skitter along the back of his neck and roll in tides over him as he sits like a stone in place. Gradually, he begins to sense even the residual presence of the twelve word-finders gathered here, faint like people in weathered old photographs. This is where they came to find the words. There’s a feeling like autumn leaves piling on top of him—he’s become a piece of furniture himself, unable even to give the impression that he can move. With a hollow feeling he shrinks and shrinks, his insides ebbing away from his outsides, knowing implacably this is precisely how it has to be, to freeze and freeze, it’s all part of the story. A cold aroma gradually fills his nose and expands down into his chest, pressing down farther into his empty cavities and numbing his limbs, making him even drowsier, and even colder, and even less concerned with himself, and he wants to embark,

finally, sink into the weight and rest. It’s a smell of repose, relaxing, peace and quiet, unending, ever-heavier dreams.

It’s the stink of wet dirt and rotting leaves—his eyes fly open and he instinctively recoils, pushing the chair over backwards and tumbling out slamming his head against the floor. Twisted dark shapes trailing shadows had flocked around him like buzzards, looming together wreathing him all around, they scatter fast back out of sight blurring, and the Eclogue suddenly is there, sharper, clear where it had been obscured, but still only looming, on the way but not arrived. The Divinity Student, his head ringing like a copper bell, drags himself across the floor like a man plucked from a freezing river. His bones are groaning like rusting machinery, but with every movement he gets going faster, shaking the cold, panic searing at him instead. He still has to finish properly, see it through or fail once and for all. Outside the cars are howling, their tires are whining on the pavement, their horns are blaring—and there’s another noise. Slithering on his belly like a snake the Divinity Student slides out the door and down to one end of the landing, near the windows. Muscles complaining he lifts himself on the lower lip of the sill and peers out. There are three cars swerving drunkenly on the street below, jumping the pavement and splintering fenceposts, gouging furrows in the yard, spinning their tires and kicking up paving stones through the porch windows. The air is boiling with shadows ducking in and out through their windshields and doors, shadows with vicious bent figures and low whistling voices, whipping elastic through the air like clothes on a line.

Downstairs a crash that could only be the front door, slapped flat to the floor. Barking dogs and heavy padding with clicking claws in and out of the rooms, scaling the stairs, filling the house, baying, fighting each other. The Divinity Student is on his feet, the din getting intolerable with a dozen answering voices in every room responding in every register until the floor shakes and the walls rattle and the ceiling cracks. Black dogs the size of calves loping through doorways, and things beyond describing prowling, flying, dancing, swimming, lurking everywhere until they’re all he can see. The Divinity Student runs up and down the stairs batting them out of his face, running from room to room, trying to escape. The cars are roaring in the yard horns droning like sirens, and inside the babble and the shriek and mutter surging louder like bedlam, so keep running from one room to

another, keep running, stop and turn back and run again, rescue, rescue, breathing hard in a panic but never stopping going round the house, looking singlemindedly set on finishing. Run and watch the house dissolve before his feet, the last tenuous fabric going translucent dark and fading away until wooden floors turn cobbled streets and plaster walls of stripping paint and bubbling wallpaper go marble and stone and ebony with wrought-iron fixings, lamps to streetlights, tables to monuments, bookshelves to shops, curtains to trees, windows turn from inward to outward and the ceiling yawns translated into an endless void lit with huge heat-distorted constellations where minutes ago there were gaslights. The must of an old house going to earth and stained with formaldehyde turns to the manycolored spectrum of a city's smells, and the streets of San Veneficio burst out on all sides cutting between looming houses crammed with people, and around him, still weaving things and shapes like an army rushing around him in the dark, voices broadening too to a dizzying variety until the vastness of the sound homogenizes into a seething drone and the kaleidoscope of silhouettes and luridly colored luminous things blends together into a transparent, boiling cloud.

San Veneficio comes clear again. The sky is a hurricane of motionless black clouds like the swirled cone of a cavern roof, from horizon to horizon save for the storm's round eye immediately overhead. There the pupilless moon stares down, and strange shadows move on its face, its light dapples the city blue and red. Where it's blue, San Veneficio is a ruin. The streets are empty and quiet, the buildings crumbling and bleached like ancient grave markers, the air turns chill and thin, the Divinity Student's breath steams acrid in his face, his feet stir plumes of dust powdering the ground like fine snow. Where it's red, the streets buck and shift like the deck of a doomed ship, the air rises in hot transparent coils so that the city distorts, as if viewed through a window of wrinkled glass. The outlines of the buildings around him billow like smoke, they hide enormous roaring engines, legions of enemies. In passing from color to color he can feel his wake in the air reflected back on himself, as if he'd run through a doorway where no walls or door had been. He looks down at himself and, like looking into a convex mirror, his body distorts, curving down to the ground, legs tapering to points, his pale hands like a doll's hands, his own pale face startling him in windows, and the rest of him lost in heavy folds of black coat.

For one hundred years he’s making his way toward the center of the city, where the drone of the Eclogue is swelling in increments to a shattering roar with an audible gap into which he will be fitted. Dark and heavy the world falls away slowly. San Veneficio is a maze, dead-end and then turn to dead-end again, but always a column of smoke rising from the center, a clanging siren, and that’s what he follows, running to be attached to them. He sees all but the largest now, those that rush by whale-sized, glistening in corners chirping and muttering to each other. The rest blend into the air. A train passing screams at him with a woman’s voice. Somewhere on a back street he meets a man he’d met before on the floor of a hotel room. He drops from a melting fire escape and stops in his tracks to stare at the Divinity Student. That single inexplicable look masks his eyes, so that when he looks again, the man is gone. Passing the cemetery, he sees huge pulsing trees burrowing into graves with their roots, their branches forking like capillaries into fleshy clouds. Another time he is stopped by someone else, someone who dances in an awkward, heavy circle, and vanishes into the corner of a building. Two men pass him on a rooftop holding hands, and passing, they greet him and wish him welcome. He never stops long, but keeps making his way toward the center of the city. He doesn’t count the twelve men that he meets, one after another. The closer the column of smoke looms the faster he goes, and once he enters the inner district, he moves fastest of all. Now he’s all but flying, feet barely touching the ground, streaking dust behind him in blue light, dancing along the uneven cobbles in the buckling red light, suspended between the ground and the air. And once in a while, he’ll look up, to see someone pacing him along the rooftops, vaulting from chimney to weathervane, skating on gutters, using roof slates for her stepping stones, and her black-gloved hands flutter in their lace cuffs like spiders in white flowers.

He gains the inner city at last, coming to San Veneficio’s heart, the Orpheum and its great empty plaza milling with a thousand invisible shapes, sounding with a thousand hollow voices. Here the light is pure, the moon shines like an iceberg in stark white sterile light, the Orpheum is neither smoke nor ruin, but it blazes like a second moon, cool and unsearing. The voice comes from deep inside, a disconnected, businesslike voice chanting inside the Orpheum, and a column of smoke dissipating across the city now that the Divinity Student has arrived. A lone white

figure with long black legs whips through the air like lightning to plant her feet firmly atop the apex of the Orpheum's shining dome. She raises her two arms high in the air and turns her face to the Divinity Student, she bows her head to the Divinity Student, who is coming through the plaza to stand directly before the palace's great doors, between the statues of San Veneficio's greatest poets and a dry fountain filled with earth and blossoming night plants, where dark and heavy the world falls beneath a single gap in the clouds where the moon is moving away to reveal—

Voices rise again on all sides and shapes outlined in the dazzling light take on substance again, altogether a vast soundless noise and lightless light Eclogue, parting to dimension an aperture. A terrible feeling takes the Divinity Student, like a clod of dirt lodged in his chest, and branching through his limbs. He clutches his chest and falls forward, acid pain scalding him inside. The pain climaxes as the chant from the Orpheum reaches its crescendo and he then raises his head despite his agony, because he recognizes the words. Now he knows the words, and the language, his own language, finally roots in him. A dark place he's seen before collapses all around him, and in darkness the Divinity Student catches with creation on the air, hooking his teeth, the Eclogue clothes him and strips him in divinity and takes him like a messenger, he is drawn up into the sky.

Naked seabed. The sky is a still canopy, like the underside surface of a lake, and blue light shines on the marble walls striking patterns across the hot ground like dancing traceries of light reflected from rippling water. Sitting alone in a spacious cab, the Divinity Student watches the sweat trickle down the driver's neck, wind buffeting him from the open window. A single road lies flat.

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